

Brill's Companion to Classical Reception and Modern World Poetry

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Brill's Companion to Classical Reception and Modern World Poetry

Edited by

Polina Tambakaki



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Notes on Contributors

Federico Bonaddio

is Reader in Modern Spanish Studies at King's College London. He has written on Spanish poetry, including the work of Federico García Lorca, as well as on the Spanish novel and Spanish popular cinema and short film. He is co-editor of *Crossing Fields in Modern Spanish Culture* (Oxford: Legenda, 2003), editor of *A Companion to Federico García Lorca* (Woodbridge: Tamesis, 2007), and author of *Federico García Lorca: The Poetics of Self-Consciousness* (Woodbridge: Tamesis, 2010) and *Federico García Lorca: The Poetry in All Things* (Woodbridge: Tamesis, 2022).

Terri L. DeYoung

is Professor of Arabic Language and Literature at the University of Washington. She received her BA from Princeton University (1977), her MA from the American University in Cairo (1981), and her Ph.D. from the University of California, Berkeley (1988). She is the author of several articles and studies on modern and medieval Arabic literature. Her monographs include *Placing the Poet: Badr Shakir al-Sayyab and Postcolonial Iraq* (1998) and *Mahmud Sami al-Barudi: Reconfiguring Society and the Self* (2015).

Nicola Gardini

is Professor of Italian and Comparative Literature at the University of Oxford. He is the author of numerous books: novels, poetry collections, literary essays, and translations of poetry from English, Latin, and Greek. His book *Long Live Latin* (Profile Books, 2019) became an international bestseller. He contributes literary articles to the most important Italian daily newspapers. He is the President of Salani, the Italian publisher of *Harry Potter*.

Alison James

is Professor of French at the University of Chicago. She is the author of *Constraining Chance: Georges Perec and the Oulipo* (Northwestern UP, 2009) and *The Documentary Imagination in Twentieth-Century French Literature* (Oxford UP, 2020). She has also edited volumes and journal issues on literary formalism, fieldwork literatures, and nonfiction across media, and has published articles on contemporary poets such as Michèle Métail, Jacques Roubaud, and Jacques Jouet.

Charlie Louth

is Professor of German and Comparative Literature at the University of Oxford and a Fellow of The Queen's College. He is the author of *Rilke: The Life of the Work* (2020) and of *Hölderlin and the Dynamics of Translation* (1998), plus many articles on poetry from Goethe to Celan and Philippe Jaccottet. He has also published translations of Hölderlin's *Essays and Letters* (Penguin, 2009, with Jeremy Adler) and of Rilke's *Letters to a Young Poet* and *Letter from the Young Worker* (Penguin, 2011).

Patrice Rankine

is Professor of Classics at the University of Chicago and author of two monographs on the classics among African American writers, one on literary reception, *Ulysses in Black: Ralph Ellison, Classicism, and African American Literature* (University of Wisconsin Press, 2006), and the other a study of performative aspects of classical reception, *Aristotle and Black Drama: A Theater of Civil Disobedience* (Baylor University Press, 2013). He is also co-author of *The Oxford Handbook of Greek Drama in the Americas* (2015), with Kathryn Bosher, Fiona Macintosh, and Justine McConnell.

A. E. Stallings

is an American poet, translator, and critic who lives in Greece. She has published four volumes of poetry, most recently *Like*, a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize, and three books of verse translation. A 2011 fellow of the Guggenheim and MacArthur foundations, she is also member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. A "Selected Poems" is forthcoming from Farrar, Straus and Giroux in the US, and Carcanet in the UK.

Polina Tambakaki

is Research Fellow in the Centre for Hellenic Studies, King's College London. Her research interests include the relationship of poetry to music, modernism, classical reception, and the relationship between literature and history. She is an expert in the poet-diplomat George Seferis and the Cypriot writer and artist Niki Marangou. She is the lead editor of the volume *Music, Language and Identity in Greece* (Routledge, Publications of the Centre for Hellenic Studies, King's College London, 2019).

Giddon Ticotsky

is a faculty member at the Department of Hebrew Literature at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, specializing in modern Hebrew literature. He is also a Research Associate at the Center for Spatial and Textual Analysis (CESTA),

Stanford University. Among his publications are volumes on the Israeli women-poets Lea Goldberg and Dahlia Ravikovitch.

Elizabeth Vandiver

is Clement Biddle Penrose Professor Emerita of Latin and Classics at Whitman College, Walla Walla, Washington. Her research focuses on classical receptions in British literature of the early 20th century. She is the author of *Stand in the Trench, Achilles: Classical Receptions in British Poetry of the Great War* (Oxford University Press, 2010) and various articles and book chapters on First World War poets and early modernism. She is completing a book on Richard Aldington.

Akira V. Yatsuhashi

is Associate Professor of English and Instructor of Latin and Ancient Greek at the State University of New York, College at Oneonta. His research focuses on the uses of literature, erudition, and scholarly writing in shaping and defining cultural and ethnic identity in colonial and imperial contexts, predominantly in Hellenistic Alexandria but also in modern Japan. He has published on Herodotus and Lycophron.

Michelle Yeh

received her BA in English from the National Taiwan University and her PhD in comparative literature from the University of Southern California. She has been a visiting professor at Harvard, Columbia, Peking, and Nanjing Universities. Currently she is Distinguished Professor at the University of California, Davis. Her primary research interests are modern Chinese poetry, East-West poetics, modern literature of Taiwan, and translation studies.

Modern World Poetry and the Graeco-Roman Reception

Themes and Approaches

Polina Tambakaki

Goethe's idea of *Weltliteratur* holds a central place in the field of World Literature. David Damrosch's book *What is World Literature?*, for example, opens with Goethe and his statements from his conversations with Eckermann (first published in 1836, four years after Goethe's death): "I am more and more convinced that poetry is the universal possession of mankind [...] National literature is now a rather unmeaning term; the epoch of world literature is at hand, and everyone must strive to hasten its approach."¹ Damrosch proceeds by posing the following questions: "What does it really mean to speak of a 'world literature'? Which literature, whose world? What relation to the national literatures whose production continued unabated even after Goethe announced their obsolescence? What new relations between Western Europe and the rest of the globe, between antiquity and modernity, between the nascent mass culture and elite productions?"² These questions are pivotal to the present volume, which centers on poetry, dealing with the question of the relations *between antiquity and modernity* from the angle of the reception of Graeco-Roman antiquity in modern poetry from *Western Europe and the rest of the globe* (Damrosch's wording, in italics).

The volume combines the fields of World Literature and Classical Reception, paying attention to the various perspectives from which the notions of identity, specificity and universality have been treated in both fields, also in relation to questions of Eurocentrism and the hegemonic role of the English language in modern world literature. In this context, the chapters in the volume are arranged not thematically or geographically, but in alphabetical order based on the English name of the language in which the poems discussed in each chapter have been written. By the same token, poems in a language other than

¹ See, for example, Damrosch (2003), 1.

² Damrosch (2003), 1.

English are given not only in translation but also in their original language and script, thus creating a visual disruption of the dominant English text.³

Each chapter has a different scope and approach, and in that sense the volume can be described as polyphonic and kaleidoscopic. There are chapters devoted to a single poet, providing an overview of that poet's relationship to Graeco-Roman antiquity: these are the chapters on Yang Mu (ch. 2, Yeh; Chinese language); Rainer Maria Rilke (ch. 6, Louth; German language); and Federico García Lorca (ch. 11, Bonaddio; Spanish language). There are also chapters on a single poet which focus on a particular theme, element, or poetic work: these are the chapters on George Seferis (ch. 7, Tambakaki; Greek language) and Nishiwaki Junzaburo (ch. 10, Yatsuhashi; Japanese language). The chapter on Black poetry (ch. 3, Rankine; English language) is among those providing an overview of classical reception in Black English poetry, focusing on the question of Blackness. The selection criterion in all other chapters dealing with specific traditions relates to language: Arabic (ch. 1, DeYoung); Hebrew (ch. 8, Ticotsky); Italian (ch. 9, Gardini). The rest of the chapters are devoted each to a group of poets from the same linguistic tradition with shared interests and traits: to the (English-speaking) Imagists (ch. 4, Vandiver) and to French poets with special interest in the Presocratic philosophers (ch. 5, James).

In this introduction I will address questions of scope, terminology and methodology which have been central to both the fields of Classical Reception and World Literature, also drawing on specific chapters in the volume. The aim is to situate the volume in the bibliography, as a whole and through its individual chapters. The completion of the editorial work coincided with the coronavirus pandemic and the outbreak of war in Ukraine, and a Prelude preceding the main discussion situates key themes and questions within the current "mean-spirited" context and within current discussions on world literature and/or classics in pandemic times.⁴

3 Unlike in the present introduction, where all quotations from non-English sources are given only in English translation.

4 The volume would not have been possible without the contributors' and reviewers' erudition, enthusiasm, patience, support, and enormous help. I am deeply grateful to them all, as well as to the Series Editor, Kyriakos Demetriou, the reader for the press, and Giulia Moriconi, Associate Editor for Classics. I owe special thanks to John Kittmer for his valuable advice at the final stages of editorial work. On discussions on classics, world literature and pandemics, see, for example, the *Journal of World Literature* (2022), volume 7, issues 1 and 2, both devoted to "World Literature in and for Pandemic Times," and Pandey (2020), "Classics after Coronavirus" (*Eidolon*; website). The following abbreviations are used: *OCD*5: *Oxford Classical Dictionary*, digital (website); *OED*: *Oxford English Dictionary*, digital (website); *The Classical Tradition*: A. Grafton, G. W. Most, S. Settis (2010) *The Classical Tradition*, Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press. For details of digital resources (websites

1 Prelude: Global Poetic Cartographies in a Mean-Spirited Time

The Greek word *pandemos*, from which the word “pandemic” derives, means “common to all people,” from the Greek words *pan*, meaning “whole,” and *demos*, meaning “people, populace.” Within the order (or *cosmos*) of an ancient Greek city or city-state (*polis*), the word meant something not only popular (or even vulgar), but also global. Its prefix, *pan*, is found in many “global” terms which appear in the present volume, such as the political movement of pan-Africanism; the school of thought of Pan-Babylonism; or the word “panorama,” whose second component derives from the Greek verb *oraō*, meaning “to see.” Indeed, the volume was designed with the aspiration to provide a sort of panoramic view of the classical reception in modern poetry. Yet the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic, followed by the outbreak of war in Ukraine and fears for a Third World War, put this aspiration into a new light, not least reminding us that the word “panorama” was first used for a form of painting creating for the viewers the illusion that they had been magically transferred to a distant locality, “at a time when actual international travel had been severely curtailed by the effects of the Napoleonic War.”⁵

The immediate pre-COVID-19 period, during which the volume was designed and the chapters were written, was not wanting in either dramatic changes or seemingly unshakable certainties, and “globalization” was one of the terms most widely used to denote a process with multiple dimensions – economic, political, cultural, technological and ecological. When the pandemic broke out, the effects of the 2008 global economic crisis were still strongly felt. Humanitarian crises connected with violent conflicts and political instability were dire realities in many places in the world, and immigration and emigration, exiles and refugees, were permanent points of reference and debate in the political sphere, mass media, and academia. Tensions between superpowers were high, for which terms relating to Graeco-Roman antiquity were often used, such as the expression “Thucydides trap” to describe U.S.-China relations. Developments in communications technology were promising ever faster interconnectivity in the cyberspace. Earth was calling SOS. Concerning world literature production and consumption in particular, authors and scholars were traveling extensively, to know the world and be known by the world, participating in literary and research activities, conferences, and book presentations, and building international networks of intellectual exchanges.

and blogs), see Bibliography. On the phrase “mean-spirited time” from Hölderlin’s *Bread and Wine*, see ch. 7, Tambakaki.

5 British Library 1 (website).

The pandemic lockdowns put an abrupt hold on physical travels. Borders were closed on national, regional, or local levels, and in person, physical, interaction became difficult, dangerous, and in some cases impossible or illegal. In their great majority, public places of special importance to authors and scholars, such as libraries, universities, or museums, were closed. The advent of vaccines against the coronavirus was accompanied by a leap of faith in science and technology, as well as of hope for the liberation from the pandemic. At the same time vaccine nationalism, preventing global access to vaccine as a universal possession of mankind (to paraphrase Goethe) not only showed the limits of (or illusions about) such hopes, but also threw into relief the tensions between nationalism and internationalism, localism and universalism. The outbreak of war in Ukraine in February 2022 as a potential (or imminent) Third World War, while the pandemic was still ongoing, confirmed these tensions in the most dramatic way.

Within this context, in a long blog posted in the first days of the war, Edith Hall returned to a Ukrainian woman poet on whom she had written in her 2012 book *Adventures with Iphigenia in Tauris: A Cultural History of Euripides' Black Sea Tragedy*: Lesya Ukrainka (pseudonym of Larysa Kosach; 1871–1913).⁶ A few months before the outbreak of the war, an event devoted to the same poet had also taken place in the British Library in London, “situating the feminist and modernist writing of Lesia Ukrainka firmly in the European literary canon.”⁷ A feminist and Marxist (she also translated the *Communist Manifesto*), Ukrainka suffered severe health problems and was obliged to spend long periods in the warmer climates of southern France, Germany, Italy, and Egypt, as well as in sanatoria in the Caucasus and Crimea. She was a polyglot, well versed in Greek and Latin, and in modern European languages and literatures, who had chosen to write in her first language, Ukrainian, which was then banned from public use by the Russian Empire. In her adaptation of Euripides' *Iphigenia in Tauris* the importance of locality is obvious: Ukrainka had already celebrated Tauris/Crimea in her poetry collection *Crimean Recollections*.

Ukrainka's case straddles the chronological boundaries of the present volume: from the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century (when Ukrainka lived and wrote her poetry), through a long period with many political and cultural watersheds (during which Ukrainka's name was given to national libraries in many cities in Ukraine), until today (when Ukrainka's work has emerged in both the fields of Classical Reception and World Literature, while the Ukrainka Library in Mariupol has, in all probability,

6 Hall (2012), 258–63 and Hall (website).

7 British Library 3 (website).

been destroyed). At the same time, her case poses a key question: how does a poet come to be regarded as a member of the world literary community?

1.1 *Cosmopolitanism, Language, and Identity*

Poets found in books on world literature have almost always been characterized as cosmopolites. Not surprisingly, the term was also used for Ukrainka, in the event in the British Library mentioned above;⁸ and in the chapter on Hebrew poetry (ch. 8, Ticotsky) we also find the poem “I am a cosmopolite” by Nathan Zach. In contrast to the word “globalization” (from the Latin *globus*, meaning “sphere”), which is a rather recent term with a clearly economic aspect,⁹ the word “cosmopolite” (from the Greek word *cosmopolites*, a compound of *cosmos*, order or world, and *polites*, a citizen) has a long history, allegedly going back to the statement of the fourth-century BCE Cynic philosopher Diogenes of Sinope (“A Socrates gone mad,” according to a phrase attributed to Plato): “I am a *cosmopolites*.”¹⁰ In a challenging contrast to the image of Diogenes the *cosmopolites*, who lived in a barrel, cosmopolitanism is firmly connected with traveling around the world.

Questions of cosmopolitanism are central to the present volume, albeit sometimes in an indirect way. The book *Cosmopolitanism* (2006) by the British-Ghanaian philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah – whose studies on identity and on the sociologist and activist W. E. B. du Bois play a significant role in the chapter on Black poetry; ch. 3, Rankine – starts precisely with “A Traveler’s Tale.” The traveler was a British man of the nineteenth century, the heyday of the British Empire: the Victorian adventurer Sir Richard Francis Burton, who also provides an exceptional example of multilingualism. Burton had an astonishing knowledge of various languages, modern and ancient, and combined elements of “both cosmopolitans and anti-cosmopolitans” to an extreme degree.¹¹ Appiah’s dedication of the book encapsulates his own cosmopolitan viewpoint: “For my mother, citizen of one world and many,” followed by two lines (in the original and without translation) by the Latin poet Catullus: “... tibi: namque tu solebas / meas esse aliquid putare nugas.”¹² In the present volume, Burton’s contribution to Catullus’ modern reception is salient in the chapter on the Catullan “translatory acts” by Nishiwaki (ch. 10, Yatsushashi).

8 British Library 3 (website).

9 The word is traced after the 1930s (perhaps after the French “globalisation” (1904)); *OED*.

10 Diogenes Laertius 6.54 and 63.

11 Appiah (2006), 1.

12 “To thee [...]; for wast ever fain / To deem my trifles somewhat boon contain” (trans. Richard Burton).

Questions of traveling and exile crop up in all chapters of the volume. In a sort of cartography of traveling poets, we see personal trajectories being often intertwined with collective travels or migrations. As for the role played by language in these cartographies, important questions are whether poets live or travel within or outside their first language or “mother tongue” context, within single-language or multilingual environments or locals.¹³ As cases such as those of Burton and Ukrainka demonstrate, these questions are further related to wider linguistic and cultural realities and politics. In a volume on modern world literature, for example, it is worth keeping in mind the official languages of world organizations, such as the United Nations (UN), founded in the aftermath of the Second World War: (in alphabetical order) Chinese, English, French, Russian, and Spanish, to which Arabic was added in 1974 (see also below about the question of foreign language acquisition).

The question of identity, “we” and the “Others,” is central to all physical or imaginary travels and any perception of the world and human interaction, in times of peace and times of war. We see this in the poem “The Question of Identity” by Kristin (Hunter) Lattany, in the chapter on Black poetry (ch. 3, Rankine), which touches on language, gender, and power, in relation to race, against a background of day-to-day social interaction in times of peace:

The Danes all told my husband, “Your French wife
Is charming,” and in slyer, suaver France,
[...]
The Question shimmered, shadowed. [...]
[...]
In London I was from Bombay; again
In Paris, I found I could not faze
By answering, “Je suis Americaine,”
Those who demanded, “Êtes-vous japonnaise?”
No matter what I said, they smiled. They knew.
“Vous êtes de Guadeloupe. Ou de Peru.”
[...]
Denying all their dim, exotic lands,
Repeating, firmly, clearly, “Je suis noire.”

1.2 *Boundaries, Technology, and the Book*

The pandemic with its lockdowns of different types brought about a new sense of boundaries. On the one hand, physical travels were restricted or banned, and, on the other hand, unprecedented virtual traveling and communication

13 On multilingual locals and world literature, see Laachir, Marzagora and Orsini (2018).

were taking place (in both “synchronous” and “asynchronous” ways), with visits, for examples, to libraries or museums, social interactions, and intellectual exchanges, all happening remotely, “from home” (on the condition, of course, that internet connection was available).

The 2020 Frankfurt Buchmesse/Book Fair provides a representative example of such exchanges. Not only is the Book Fair regarded as the largest and oldest book fair in the world, but it is also one of high symbolic value. For one thing, Frankfurt am Main is the native city of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1832), with whom the very idea of world literature is intimately bound.¹⁴ For a physical visitor of the 2020 Frankfurt Buchmesse, the Goethe House would have been half-an-hour walk from the venue of the Book Fair. But in 2020, visiting the Book Fair was a new global virtual experience. Announcing it, its director said: “We have set up a digital book festival and a virtual broadcasting center, where we will broadcast from the Frankfurt Festhalle to the whole world.”¹⁵

The impact of both the pandemic and the war in Ukraine on the life of the book and on world literature is to be seen in the future, also in relation to specific cases: for example, in relation to how the pandemic affected the writing and reception of Orhan Pamuk’s novel *Nights of Plague* (first published in Turkish in March 2021), on which Pamuk had started working well before the pandemic;¹⁶ or in relation to anthologies of poetry such as *Singing in the Dark: A Global Anthology of Poetry Under Lockdown* (2020), edited by K. Satchidanandan and Nishi Chawla. In the anthology, we read, for example, in the poem “Hearts and Lungs” by Cyril Dabydeen:

Oh the heart and knowing what else
the rib cage tells us about, a distinct
rhythm only I will contend with,
like Odysseus, or some other

I’ve considered less about at
odd moments in distant places,
the imagination indeed, or being
Homer again with mythology.¹⁷

14 See above, p. 1.

15 Deutsche Welle (website).

16 Pamuk, Damrosch, Ungureanu (2022).

17 In Satchidanandan and Chawla (2020); see Patnaik (2022), 70, also on the anthology *And We Came Outside and Saw the Stars Again* (Stavans (2022)).

For the time being it is worth quoting what the sociologist Nicholas Christakis wrote in his book *Apollo's Arrow* (2020): "Like the serious plagues before it, the COVID-19 pandemic will be a historical watershed," also explaining that the book's title refers to the god Apollo, who in the myth of the Trojan War, as described by Homer, "was both a healer and the bringer of disease."¹⁸ Indeed, "Western literature starts with a disease": "[Apollo's] coming was like the night," Homer says in the first lines of the *Iliad*.¹⁹

1.3 *Epistemological and Methodological Questions: Literary Terms and Definitions of Time and Space*

How is literature situated in historical and cultural contexts? The advent of the coronavirus pandemic triggered a wide interest in previous pandemics, especially that of 1918–1919, known as the "Spanish flu." It thus became common knowledge, for example, that the 1918–1919 pandemic's name was not the result of a Spanish provenance of the virus, as one might think, but of the fact that, "not being a party to the war, [Spain] was one of the few countries to openly report the spreading plague."²⁰ Studies in pandemics published before 2019 were now read in a totally new light. In one such study, *Pandemics: A Very Short Introduction* by Christian McMillen, published in 2016, we read, for example, that, although its death toll was by far much higher than that of the First World War, the "Spanish flu" pandemic "has been all but forgotten. Its impact is barely detectable in memory or literature. Aside from the few books solely devoted to it, the pandemic rarely features in any substantial way in histories of the time. But could the same possibly be true in India, where nearly twenty million people died? Perhaps, but we don't know."²¹ It is in the context of the coronavirus pandemic that discussions on world literature such as "The World Poetics of Lockdown in Pandemic Poetry" by Anhiti Patnaik reminded us that in the novel *Twilight in Delhi* (1940) by Ahmed Ali there are graphic descriptions of New Delhi in 1918 as "a city of the dead."²²

In addition to its human toll and medical-scientific and ethical questions, the coronavirus pandemic thus also brought to the foreground difficult epistemological and methodological questions about presences and absences, narratives and blind spots, conceptions and definitions of time and space,

18 Christakis (2020), xiii.

19 See Medical Humanities (website); Hom. *Il.* 1.43–52: Apollo descends from Olympus carrying the arrows of disease in his quiver on his shoulders, which he throws against the mortals.

20 Honigsbaum (2009), xiii.

21 McMillen (2016), 100. On literature, see Outka (2019).

22 Patnaik (2022), 70–1.

arbitrariness and conventionality of terms – as in the case of the “Spanish flu” and its influence on literature. All these questions pertain to the present volume too, concerning, for example, the use of terms from the fields of Classical Reception and/or World Literature, and the definition of the time frame in which the poets dealt with in this volume are situated.

In fact, terms such as “Global Modernism” or “International Classical Reception”²³ might well have featured in this volume’s title. After all, the cities of Paris and London appear in most of the chapters, as linguistic and cultural centers or metropolises. As for temporal signposts, the turn of the twentieth century looks an obvious starting point.²⁴ Yet in a volume on world literature and classical reception it is important to keep in mind, for example, not only that the word “classical” relates to many “classical traditions,” but also that the very notion of the “twentieth century AD or CE” is defined according to the modern (international) “Western clock.”²⁵ As we will see, in this volume different clocks are at work, implicitly or explicitly (see, for example, “the clock of Hebrew literature,” ch. 8, Ticotsky), and because of that, terms prevalent in all discussions about modern American (US) and European poetry are used in this introduction with caution. I have preferred instead to use a few globally significant snapshots, as more helpful in delineating central themes of the present volume and specific temporal and geographical pointers in a more polyphonic way.

1.4 *Snapshots*

Visitors to the *Exposition Universelle* which took place in Paris from April to November 1900 were strolling along the Rue des Nations seeing pavilions from Empires, their colonies and dependencies, and from modern nation-states, which had started to emerge during the so-called “Age of Revolution.”²⁶ Close to the Eiffel Tower (the symbol of the 1889 World Fair and part of the wider area that in 1991 was recognized by UNESCO as a World Heritage site), a gigantic celestial globe, containing a terrestrial one inside it, embodied the universality of the exhibition. In a sketch for the exhibition the word “Cosmorama” dominates on the globe’s surface, meaning precisely a spectacle of the whole world, on earth and in space.²⁷ The construction had been inspired by ideas

23 Cf., for example, Cuddy-Keane (2006); Wollaeger and Eatough (2012); Bertens and Fokkema (1997); and the International Classical Reception Studies Network ICRSN.

24 On the term “modern poetry,” cf., for example, Noel-Tod and Hamilton (2013).

25 Cf. Prendergast (2004), 6: “it would be impossible to avoid the inbuilt ethnocentrism of literary-historical periodizations, what [Arjun] Appadurai calls ‘Eurochronology.’”

26 Hobsbawm (1962).

27 See Galeron (website).

and sketches of the anarchist French geographer Elisée Reclus, author of the 19-volume *New Universal Geography*, whose approach had a poetic side too, shared with other major geographers of the nineteenth century. One of the most famous was Alexander von Humboldt with his *Kosmos*, to which Walt Whitman's poem "Kosmos" directly refers:

Who includes diversity and is Nature.

[...]

Who believes not only in our globe with its sun and moon, but in other
globes with their suns and moons,

Who, constructing the house of himself or herself, not for a day but for all
time, sees races, eras, dates, generations,

The past, the future, dwelling there, like space, inseparable together.

The 1900 Paris Exhibition provided its visitors with different approaches to diversity and nature. For example, there were "native villages," that is, live displays of "primitive" men in "native conditions." And there was also "The Exhibit of American Negroes," including photographs of African Americans and their life (although not ones of lynching; on Claude McKay's sonnet "The Lynching," see ch. 3, Rankine).²⁸ Du Bois (see above) played a central role in the project, as he had done in the First Pan-African Conference, which took place in London just prior to the Paris Exhibition. The temporal closeness of the two events was not accidental. Given the travel possibilities of the time, the organizers of the Pan-African Conference aimed to assemble as many as possible "men and women of African blood, to deliberate solemnly upon the present situation and outlook for the darker races of mankind."²⁹

While the Paris Exhibition was in full swing, another snapshot brings us to an area more than four thousand miles away from Paris:³⁰ near the oasis town of Dunhuang in western China, "a strategic point along the Silk Route, at the crossroads of trade as well as religious, cultural and intellectual influences." There, in the summer of 1900, a major discovery was made by a Taoist monk: an immense number of manuscripts in a variety of languages and scripts were found in a cave, which had been sealed and hidden since the end of the first millennium BCE. The discovery "has been acclaimed as the world's greatest discovery of ancient Oriental culture." In 1987 the Mogao Caves, of which

28 Lewis and Willis (2003), 30.

29 Pan-African Association (website), address signed by Du Bois, Alexander Walters, Henry B. Brown, and H. Sylvester Williams.

30 All quotations in this paragraph are from the UNESCO 1 (website), and IDP (website).

the so-called Library Cave is part, were recognized by UNESCO as a World Heritage site, and in 1994 the International Dunhuang Project (IDP) was established with a series of local centers: in London (the basis of IDP's directorate), Beijing, Dunhuang, St. Petersburg, Kyoto, Berlin, and Paris. The project aimed to coordinate the study of the Dunhuang manuscripts which since their discovery had been dispersed around the world: "to make information and images of all manuscripts, paintings, textiles and artefacts from Dunhuang and archaeological sites of the Eastern Silk Road freely available on the Internet and to encourage their use through educational and research programmes."

The period spanning from the 1900 Paris Exposition, the First Pan-African Conference, and the discovery of the Dunhuang Library, until the establishment of the International Dunhuang project, provides the time frame for most of the literary production examined in the present volume. Only a few works come from before that period; and even if some poems come from the digital era, none of the poets dealt with in the volume can be characterized as a digital cosmopolitan or a poet-citizen of the digital world. Concerning readership, on the other hand (including the poets themselves as readers), the time frame is broader, covering a period from the late nineteenth century (according to the "western clock") until our time. This time frame can also be defined as the period from the achievement of almost universal literacy and the emergence of the "common reader" in countries such as Britain,³¹ to the era of the digital learner, machine translation and the hypertextual library of the "Internet Galaxy."³²

The digital era has also been described as the era of "Clio Wired."³³ In Greek mythology Clio is one of the Muses, "goddesses upon whom poets – and later other artists, philosophers, and intellectuals generally – depended for the ability to create their works."³⁴ Suffice it only to mention the opening of Homer's *Odyssey*: "Tell me, O Muse, of the man of many devices, who wandered full many ways after he had sacked the sacred citadel of Troy."³⁵ Although Clio, and her link to history (as history's Muse), does not appear in the volume (for example, through a reference to W. H. Auden's 1960 poetic collection *Homage to Clio*), Muses are present together with many references to Graeco-Roman mythology, directly or indirectly. There are, for example, various references to museums, a word derived from the ancient Greek *mouseion*, a place holy to the

31 Bradshaw (2003), 244.

32 Castells (2001).

33 R. Rosenzweig (2011).

34 A. Schachter, "Muses," *OCD*5.

35 Trans. A. T. Murray (Loeb).

Muses.³⁶ There are also extracts from the book *Conversation of the Muses* by the Swiss Francophone poet Philippe Jaccottet (ch. 5, James), and quotations from Nishiwaki (ch. 10, Yatsuhashi), such as: “O Muse, arise. / Of late thou hast been submerged too deeply in Poesy.” This invocation of the Muse – “in all probability the first one in Japanese literature” – is found in Nishiwaki’s short poem “Song of Choricós,” itself an impressive response to Richard Aldington’s “ΧΟΙΚΟΣ” (ch. 4, Vandiver).

2 World Literature and What Is a Classic: Living and Dead Languages, and Libraries as “Surgeries of the Soul”

In *Classics: A Very Short Introduction* (1996) by Mary Beard and John Henderson questions of identity are prominent, starting from the book’s endorsement by Robin Osborne: “This is no potted history of Greece and Rome, but a brilliant demonstration that the continual re-excavation of our classical past is vital if the modern world is to rise to the challenge inscribed on the temple of Apollo at Delphi to ‘Know yourself.’” Arguably, this also sounds as a justification of the fact that the influential series “A Very Short Introduction” by Oxford University Press was inaugurated by this particular volume. In the book itself further references are made to “us” and the “others”: “What makes classical culture for us more engaging and challenging than any other ancient civilization is [...] to do with the fact that Greek and Roman writers discussed, debated, and defined their own culture, and that we can still read the texts in which they did this.”³⁷ Again, in a study concerning these “other ancient civilizations,” *The Shahnameh: The Persian Epic as World Literature* (2019) by Hamid Dabashi, references to “us” and the “others” are emphatic and polemic: “we the conquered colonials have now devoured our colonial masters’ language, digested it, and made it our own.”³⁸

In all chapters of the present volume the question of “we” and the “others” is posed in various ways. For example, in the poem “Hellas” by Yang Mu (ch. 2, Yeh), the Homeric image of the Olympian gods is subtly undermined, also through references to Chinese calligraphy: “The deities no longer grind their teeth and fight for seats / On high mountaintops: stone deeply chiseled / in a calligraphic style between cursive and semi-cursive.” In the chapter on Hebrew poetry (ch. 8, Ticotsky), an opposition between “us” and the “others,”

³⁶ OED.

³⁷ Beard and Henderson (1995), 45–6.

³⁸ Dabashi (2019), 227.

in relation to the Holocaust, is painfully drawn in Lea Goldberg's essay "Your Europe," written just prior to the German surrender in the Second World War and almost simultaneously with her poem "The Lament of Odysseus": "Until the day we die we will carry it within us, this immense hurt whose name is Europe, 'your Europe,' 'their Europe,' but apparently [...] not 'our Europe,' even though we were hers, very much hers." In the case of Lorca (ch. 11, Bonaddio), the poet victim of the Spanish fascists, questions of identity relate to the poet's homosexuality and an opposition between Southern/Mediterranean and Central/Northern Europe. Again, within a Southeastern Mediterranean context, George Seferis's poem "Upon a Line of Foreign Verse" (ch. 7, Tambakaki) juxtaposes the shade of Odysseus with Ulysses in the poem "Heureux qui, comme Ulysses" by the French Renaissance poet Joachim du Bellay. In the case of Black poetry (ch. 3, Rankine), the "constant tension that Black Atlantic authors express vis-à-vis the classical form" reaches the point of negation or rejection in the poem "I no longer read poetry" by Heather Royes (which provides one of the mottos for Rankine's chapter).

What is a classic? This question is famously connected with an essay by T. S. Eliot with that title,³⁹ or, more precisely, with Eliot's inaugural Presidential address to the newly founded Virgil Society in London, given "in October 1944, as Allied forces were battling on the European mainland and German rockets were falling on London."⁴⁰ "The purpose of the Society," one reads today on its website, "was and remains to unite all those who cherish the central educational tradition of Western Europe. Of that tradition Virgil is the symbol."⁴¹ Never missing the viewpoint from which he was approaching the theme, namely from within English language and literature, Eliot stressed Virgil's importance, also as the poet who in Dante's *Divine Comedy* "guided Dante's pilgrimage" and thus "Europe toward the Christian culture."⁴² In his lecture Eliot laid emphasis on the "awareness of history"⁴³ in a way reminiscent of his notion of the "historical sense" in his essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (1919), which was published immediately after the First World War (and just after the third (and last) wave of the "Spanish flu" pandemic in England): "a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a

39 For a post-colonialist discussion (with reference to a cluster of texts with the same or similar title, for example, by Sainte-Beuve, Kermode, Coetzee), see Mukherjee (2014).

40 These are the first words of Coetzee's own "What is a Classic? A Lecture," Coetzee (2002), 1.

41 Virgil Society (website).

42 Eliot (1975), 131.

43 Eliot (1975), 123.

simultaneous order.”⁴⁴ Eliot’s poetry, his notion of the “historical sense,” and Dante, together with his guide Virgil, appear in the vast majority of the chapters of the present volume. In the chapter on Yang Mu in particular (ch. 2, Yeh) the “historical sense” appears in the title itself, and special attention is paid to Yang Mu’s poems “Virgil” and “Reading Dante at Year’s End – An Edition with Illustrations by Gustave Doré.”

“Every nation, every race, has not only its own creative, but its own critical turn of mind,” wrote Eliot in “Tradition and the Individual Talent.”⁴⁵ In the bibliography, Eliot, together with Ezra Pound, have been connected with a Modernism of global reach, polyglot and transcultural, which interwove “Euro-classicism and Chinese ideograms, cockney gossip and Sanskrit parable, Confucius and Thomas Jefferson, the thunderous God of the Hebrew Bible and a Brahmin Creator God.”⁴⁶ Pound in particular played a key role in the way in which “West met East” at the beginning of the twentieth century.⁴⁷ For Eliot himself “Chinese poetry, as we know it to-day, is something invented by Ezra Pound,” “Pound is the inventor of Chinese poetry for our time.”⁴⁸ In the present volume we encounter a similar phrase from a Chinese perspective: Yang Mu wrote about the Chinese author and scholar Zhou Zuoren that his “Hellenism is a Chinese conception” (ch. 2, Yeh). As Yeh notes, Yang Mu’s essay on Zhou Zuoren’s Hellenism “delves into the enormous influence of Greek culture on the writer, which is no less than the influence of Japan, Zhou’s second home.”

A Japanese approach to Chinese poetry is evident in the full title of Pound’s *Cathay*, the famous collection of Chinese poems Pound published in English in April 1915. In the title, in addition to the American art historian and Professor at the Imperial University in Tokyo Ernest Fenollosa (who had also written the poetic collection *East and West*), the Japanese scholars Mori Kainan and Ariga Nagao appear, while the Japanese name Rihaku is used for the Chinese poet Li Po (or Li Bai): *Cathay: Translations by Ezra Pound for the Most Part from the Chinese of Rihaku, From the Notes of the Late Ernest Fenollosa, and the Decipherings of the Professors Mori and Ariga*.⁴⁹ Pound had also been in direct contact with Chinese antiquities with the help of Laurence Binyon, from the Sub-Department of Oriental Prints and Drawings in the British Museum. This was a period in which both the British Museum and the British Library had

44 Eliot (1932), 14.

45 Eliot (1932), 13.

46 Ramazani (2009), 28.

47 Carey (2020), 222–9 (chapter entitled “West Meets East: Waley, Pound, the Imagists”). See also Goldwyn (2016).

48 Eliot (1948), xiv and xv.

49 See Pound (2018).

been acquiring impressive Chinese material, not least from the Mogao Caves in Dunhuang (see above).⁵⁰

Cathay holds a special place in Pound's poetic experiments and visions. In February 1915 he wrote (this time using the name Li Po and not Rihaku): "[...] the great *vers libre* writers before the Petrarchan age of Li Po are a treasury to which the next century may look for as great a stimulus as the renaissance had from the Greeks." And in a 1916 letter: "I will send a copy of *Cathay* so that the colonel [the writer and artist Wyndham Lewis] may be able to understand what is imagism."⁵¹ In the present volume we see the Imagists (this "group of ardent Hellenists") dealing with the question of *vers libre* through idiosyncratic views about the sound of the Greek language (ch. 4, Vandiver). Special attention is paid to Aldington's poem "ΧΟΡΙΚΟΣ" (later reprinted as "Choricos;" from the Greek word "chorus"), which, as we saw, received an impressive Japanese response in the short poem "The Song of Choricos" by Nishiwaki (ch. 10, Yatsushashi).

The question of Greek and Latin as dead languages is important in discussions in classical reception. It is no accident that when it was first published in 1912 Aldington's poem had its title written in Greek letters, nor that death is a central theme in it: "The ancient songs / Pass deathward mournfully. / Cold lips that sing no more. [...] O Death [...]." In Eliot's essay "What is a Classic?," mentioned above, the importance of Greek and Latin precisely as dead languages is stressed: "it is necessary to go to the two dead languages: it is important that they are dead, because through their death we have come into our inheritance."⁵²

But if for Eliot the distinction between dead and living languages looks clear-cut ("English is a living language and the language in which we live"),⁵³ this is not the case with other poets, especially if they come from localities and/or linguistic communities intimately related to classical languages. Thus, as Vandiver shows (ch. 4), in his peculiar theories about the sound of the Greek verse in relation to *vers libre*, Pound seems to have been influenced by *An Historical Greek Grammar* (1897) by the Greek A. N. Jannaris, who argued that the ancient language was pronounced essentially in the same way as the modern language. Discussions about the "right" or "real" pronunciation of Greek and Latin can be found in various sources. For example, one of America's Founding Fathers, Thomas Jefferson, also touched upon it, with reference to

50 See the British Museum 3 (website).

51 Both extracts (Pound (1954), 218; Pound and Lewis (1985), 39) are quoted in Xie (1999), 11.

52 Eliot (1975), 128.

53 Eliot (1975), 126.

the modern inhabitants of Greece and Italy. He wrote: "Early in life, the idea occurred to me that the people now inhabiting the ancient seats of the Greeks and Romans, although their languages in the intermediate ages had suffered great changes [...], yet having preserved the body of the word radically the same, so they would preserve more of its pronunciation."⁵⁴

Certainly Seferis (ch. 7, Tambakaki), the first Greek Nobel laureate for literature, did not argue for a similarity between ancient and modern Greek pronunciation. But in his Nobel lecture "On Modern Greek Tradition," using a musical vocabulary, he spoke of "certain things that have remained inalienable to us. When I read in Homer the simple words φάος ἡελίοιο – today I would say φως του ἡλίου, the sunlight – I experience a familiarity that is akin to a collective soul rather than to an intellectual effort. It is a note, one might say, whose harmonics reach quite far."⁵⁵ Again, in the chapter on Italian poetry (ch. 9, Gardini), the section on Giosuè Carducci, the first Italian Nobel laureate for literature, is entitled "The Music of Classical Poetry and Historical Nostalgia." We also see Giovanni Pascoli's idea of Latin as "part of his passionately nationalistic faith, and, more generally, the ultimate version of Risorgimento ideology;" and Andrea Zanzotto's "deeply historical appreciation of Latin as an unrelentingly active substratum of the Italian language." For Zanzotto (one of the poets of the volume whose life extended into the first part of the twenty-first century) the Italian language "is ultimately the living death of Latin" (ch. 9, Gardini).

The question of dead languages also relates, of course, to languages beyond Europe's "inheritance," in Eliot's words, often in combination with the question of "dead civilizations."⁵⁶ Excavations in Nineveh in the mid-nineteenth century, for example, brought to light clay tablets with cuneiform script in a hitherto unknown language, which proved to tell a story known as *The Epic of Gilgamesh*. Today the poem is found at the beginning of introductions to, or concise accounts of, world literature, such as Damrosch's *What is World*

54 In an 1819 letter to John Adams commenting on John Pickering's *On the Pronunciation of the Greek Language*. See Pickering (1887), 277–8, and (Anon.), 1819. For Pound's fascination with Jefferson, see Pound's so-called "Jefferson Cantos," his book *Jefferson and/or Mussolini*, and his essay "The Jefferson-Adams Letters as a Shrine and a Monument."

55 Nobel Prize 1 (website). The lecture was given in French. My translation. Cf. also what Odysseus Elytis, the second Greek Nobel laureate for literature said in his own speech: "Dear friends, it has been granted to me to write in a language that is spoken only by a few million people. But a language spoken without interruption, with very few differences, throughout more than two thousand five hundred years." Nobel Prize 2 (website). This lecture too was given in French.

56 Cf. Oppenheim (1977).

Literature? or John Carey's *A Little History of Poetry*.⁵⁷ The excavations in Nineveh were made by the English adventurer Austen Henry Layard, who is found in the present volume in his later capacity as collector of pictures (ch. 7, Tambakaki, about a painting by El Greco).

Back in the mid-nineteenth century, Layard also published accounts of his discoveries, starting in 1849 with *Nineveh and its Remains*, which was an instant success. At the same time, some of those remains, among them a colossal, winged, human-headed bull (Lamassu), were embarked for London to be housed under the same roof with famous Greek and Egyptian antiquities at the British Museum. The poem "The Burden of Nineveh" (first version, 1850) by the Pre-Raphaelite poet and painter Dante Gabriel Rossetti referred to Nineveh's cultural treasures, drawing a contrast between life and death:

In our Museum galleries
 To-day I lingered o'er the prize
 Dead Greece vouchsafes to living eyes –
 [...]
 And as I made the swing-door spin
 And issued, they were hoisting in
 A winged beast from Nineveh.
 [...]
 The very corpse of Nineveh.
 [...]
 [...] – a relic now
 Of London, not of Nineveh!

The poem was "freighted with its own latecomer status, both as a poem and as a record of the deeds of empire,"⁵⁸ and its dialogue with Romantic treatments of artifactual encounters was intense. In the present volume we encounter various references to English Romantic poets, especially John Keats and Percy Bysshe Shelley, whose traces are evident in Rossetti's poem, in relation, for example, to the so-called Elgin Marbles from the Parthenon on the Acropolis of Athens ("the prize / Dead Greece vouchsafes to living eyes") and the Egyptian antiquities, all housed at the British Museum. One of the poems evoked in "The Burden of Nineveh" is Shelley's famous sonnet "Ozymandias" (1818), which also relates to the question of dead languages. "Ozymandias"

57 Damrosch (2003), 39–77 (chapter 1: "Gilgamesh's Quest"); Carey (2020), 1–6 (chapter 1: "Gods, Heroes and Monsters: *The Epic of Gilgamesh*"). See also Ziolkowski (2012), 1–2.

58 Stauffer (2005), 372 and 388.

revolves around a colossal Pharaonic statue, which, as we read, has an inscription on its pedestal starting with the phrase: “My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings.” In Diodorus’ *Library of History* (i.47), a copy of which (in the original Greek) Shelley had ordered in 1812, there is a description of “a monument of the king known as Osymandyas;”⁵⁹ and before Shelley wrote the poem, it was announced that a colossal head of a Pharaonic statue was acquired by the British Museum.⁶⁰ But the statue reached London after Shelley’s poem was published, and the Egyptian hieroglyphic script was deciphered after Shelley’s death. Then the name of Diodorus’ and Shelley’s “King of Kings” was identified as Ramesses (II).

Rossetti appears in the present volume in the chapter on Arabic poetry (ch. 1, DeYoung), where we find references to his poem and painting *Astarte Syriaca* (1877), together with references to John Singer Sargent’s mural *Astarte* from the mid-1890s. By that time the cuneiform script of the dead language of the Gilgamesh tablets had been deciphered, and versions and translations of the epic had started to appear. The first such version came out in 1884: the English *Ishtar and Izdubar* (= Gilgamesh) by Leonidas Le Cenci Hamilton, who in his “Proemium” spoke of the difficulties inherent “in the reproduction of the great Epic of Babylon, the *Iliad* of Babylonia.”⁶¹

In the present volume, in the chapter on Arabic poetry (ch. 1, DeYoung), Ishtar (Astarte) makes important appearances, among them in Kahlil Gibran’s *Broken Wings*. The span of Gibran’s life (1883–1931) coincides with the period in which *The Epic of Gilgamesh* became wider known, especially in the German-speaking world, through talks and books by German Assyriologists, such as Peter Jensen, with his *Epic of Gilgamesh in World Literature* (1906, 1928), and Friedrich Delitzsch, with his lectures on “Babel and Bible” (1902–1904). Delitzsch’s lectures in particular triggered a public controversy, known as the Babel/Bible dispute, over the relationship between the stories contained in the Old Testament (or Hebrew Bible) and Babylonian myths. The theory arguing that the former was derived from the latter, as Delitzsch and Jensen advocated, is known as Pan-Babylonism (or Pan-Babylonianism).⁶²

The Hebrew Bible appears in various chapters of the present volume, in relation, for example, to Gibran’s *The Prophet* (ch. 1, DeYoung) and Lorca’s

59 And an English translation by George Booth was published in London in 1814; see British Library 2 (website).

60 Now known as “The Younger Memnon.” British Museum 4 (website).

61 Hamilton (1884), xxii; see also Ziolkowski (2012), 21.

62 See Ziolkowski (2012), 23–8.

reconstruction of Biblical accounts (ch. 11, Bonaddio). But not unexpectedly it is most present in the chapter on Hebrew literature, where we also read about the old discussions (sometimes intense) about “whether the Bible was influenced by Greek literature, or vice versa” (ch. 8, Ticotsky). In relation to modern Hebrew poetry, the question of “living” and “dead” languages is particularly crucial once again: for the “revival of Hebrew,” firmly initiated in the late nineteenth century, means that a “dead” classical language became again “living” as a spoken language. During that period, many early modern Hebrew poets came from the Russian Empire and were educated in Germany. Shaul Tchernichovsky was one of them. Among his contributions are monumental translations of Homer (see also below) and a translation of *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, published in 1924.⁶³ One year before, in 1923, the German Assyriologist Arthur Ungnad had published his study *The Epic of Gilgamesh and the Odyssey*.

Ungnad had also translated *The Epic of Gilgamesh* into German in 1911. It was this translation that Rilke read and found *The Epic of Gilgamesh* “stupendous,” as he wrote in a 1916 letter. But this fascination did not leave conspicuous marks on Rilke’s poetry,⁶⁴ what is most strongly imprinted on it is his involvement in the Graeco-Roman tradition (ch. 6, Louth). It is in the case of another German-language writer, the 1946 Nobel laureate Hermann Hesse, that *The Epic of Gilgamesh* found its way into “A Library of World Literature,” in 1929.⁶⁵

The importance of libraries in any discussion of world literature emerges explicitly in the chapter on Hebrew poetry (ch. 8, Ticotsky), in an ancient Jewish legend of intellectual property theft or “theft of wisdom”: according to it, after conquering Jerusalem, Alexander the Great “entrusted King Solomon’s library to his teacher, the philosopher Aristotle, who then proceeded to copy and translate the texts under his own name.” What is certain is that, after Alexander’s death, the Hellenistic rulers of Egypt established in Alexandria a library that aspired to become the absolute “receptacle of the world’s scriptural memory.”⁶⁶ In the pre-World-Wide-Web period, the universal Library of Alexandria (part of the Mouseion (Museum) or Institution of the Muses) encapsulated the idea of a physical space which could function as an infinite

63 With an introduction by Jacob Naftali Hertz Simchoni, himself the first translator of Josephus’ *Jewish War* into Hebrew from the original Greek. Josephus – Oxford (website).

64 On Rilke and *The Epic of Gilgamesh* and his fascination with ancient Egypt, see Ziolkowski (2012), 31–3 and Vilain (2010), 138–9.

65 See Hesse (2018).

66 Nethersole (2012), 314: “As sites encapsulating and recording specific flows of symbolic and cultural capital as well as offering tools with which to access it, libraries [...] are the receptacle of the world’s scriptural memory.”

repository – that is, something like Jorge Luis Borges’s “The Library of Babel” (1941), which opens famously with the phrase: “The universe (which others call the Library) is composed of an indefinite, perhaps an infinite number of hexagonal galleries.”⁶⁷ Yet the fact that with both its vastness and total destruction the Library of Alexandria has monopolized discussions about ancient libraries is also connected with what M. L. West wrote provocatively, in 1997, in the Preface to his study *The East Face of Helicon: West Asiatic Elements in Greek Poetry and Myth*: “There are still too many classicists who thoughtlessly use ‘the ancient world’ or ‘das Altertum’ as a synonym for ‘Graeco-Roman antiquity.’”⁶⁸ In fact Assurbanipal’s Library in Nineveh, where the tablets of *The Epic of Gilgamesh* were found, provides a much older Assyrian counterpart of the lost resources of Alexandria – and definitely a more “historical” one, since, unlike the Library of Alexandria, its destruction by fire in 612 BCE baked its clay tablets, thus ensuring their preservation.⁶⁹

But it is worth looking at a Medieval library, that of St Gall in Switzerland (also a UNESCO-World Heritage monument) to see how the complexities of the question of “our inheritance” (to return once more to Eliot’s “What is a Classic?”) are challengingly encapsulated in the Greek motto above its entrance: “ΨΥΧΗΣ ΙΑΤΡΕΙΟΝ,” “Surgery of the Soul.” Congruent with the European Humanistic spirit, the Greek inscription goes back to ancient Greece and is also charged with Christian meaning.⁷⁰ But the story the inscription tells is much more complex. The phrase is found in Diodorus’ *Library of History* (i.49), just a few paragraphs below the section that inspired Shelley’s “Ozymandias”: there we read that this was the inscription found in the “Sacred Library.” This “oldest library motto” thus goes back to Ramesses II and the Egyptian hieroglyphic script – even though the UNESCO relevant video does not mention the motto’s provenance,⁷¹ and even though Diodorus’ account “has proved difficult to reconcile with the evidence and is perhaps best viewed as an imaginative reconstruction, much like the modern memory of the library of Alexandria.”⁷²

67 Borges (1999), 112.

68 West (1997), xi.

69 See Ryholt and Barjamovic (2019), 10, and Finkel (2019).

70 See, for example, the “surgery of the souls” (= church), John of Damascus, *Three Treatises*, 1.47. Cf. the Greek motto of the Society for Classical Studies (founded in 1869 as the American Philological Association): ΨΥΧΗΙΑΤΡΟΕΙΟΝΤΑΓΓΕΛΙΑΤΑ (Letters, the physician of the soul); Society for Classical Studies (website).

71 UNESCO 2 (website).

72 See Lutz (1978) and Hagen (2019), 258–9.

3 Cosmos, Translation, and the “Music of Poetry”

The ancient word *cosmos* meant both “order” and “world,” as we saw.⁷³ And as the order of its holdings is a crucial question for the world of any library, the same applies to the *cosmos* of a volume and its contents. As said, the chapters of this volume are arranged in alphabetical order based on the English name of the language in which the poems discussed in each chapter have been written; and, unlike many books on world literature, the poems appear not only in translation but also in their original language and script. As we will see, this is also connected with the question of the “music of poetry” and poetic translation.

Two projects for the wider public have been particularly helpful in this decision: the “Poems on the Underground,” established by Judith Chernaik in 1986; and especially “Hyphen-21,” established by Rogan Wolf in 1994, with its multilingual “Poems for ... One World” section.⁷⁴ On the website of the latter, one finds public reactions, such as: “The thrill is in seeing Tamil as part of a spectrum of languages, each making its own wonderful contribution.” We are also told that the whole project was inspired by *I and Thou* (1923) (or, more accurately, *I and You* [Ich und Du]) by the philosopher Martin Buber, a book which explored “ways in which we, as individuals, deal with ‘otherness,’ the ‘not me,’ the ‘out there,’ the ‘stranger.’”⁷⁵ Buber is important for the present volume too, not least in relation to what Borges said in *The Craft of Verse*, his 1967–1968 Charles Eliot Norton Lectures at Harvard University: “I remember reading, some thirty years ago, the works of Martin Buber – I thought of them as being wonderful poems. Then [...] I read a book [...] and I found in its pages, much to my astonishment, that Martin Buber was a philosopher and that all his philosophy lay in the books I had read as poetry.”⁷⁶

Buber also made a translation of the Hebrew Bible into German, a monumental project he started in 1925 (together with Franz Rosenzweig) and completed in 1961. But between these two dates, the world had changed dramatically, having also been marked deeply by modern anti-Semitism. On the occasion of the completion of the translation, the historian and philosopher Gershom Scholem said that “the Jews for whom [Buber] undertook this translation are no longer alive, and those among their children who escaped this

73 See above, pp. 3 and 5.

74 Cf. also the Wall Poems project in Leiden, where poems appear only in the original, without translation.

75 Hyphen-21 and Poems for ... the Wall (websites).

76 Borges (2000), 30–1.

catastrophe no longer read German.”⁷⁷ Independently of different approaches to the question of readership concerning the Buber-Rosenzweig Bible,⁷⁸ the Nazi period had a linguistic consequence critical for any discussion of modern world literature: the German language, which until the beginning of the twentieth century was (together with French) one of the dominant languages in foreign languages acquisition, lost its status completely: “Virtually no country has chosen German as its first modern foreign language in the secondary educational system since 1945.”⁷⁹ English gradually occupied a predominant place. As for the classical languages of Greek and Latin, the decisions taken at Columbia College in the early twentieth century are indicative: Greek and Latin were dropped from the college requirements, and the reading of the “classics” – “long thought to be essential for educated ‘gentlemen’” – were made mainly in translation.⁸⁰ A huge crisis in humanity, the Second World War also brought about the end of Humanism (or Neohumanism), as this had been argued for by the German educator Friedrich Immanuel Niethammer at the beginning of the nineteenth century, namely the idea that secondary educational systems should be soundly based on the Greek and Roman classics.⁸¹

The great majority of poets dealt with in the present volume are men,⁸² who had received at least their basic education before the Second World War

77 Quoted in Stavans (2016), 106. It is worth mentioning Moses Mendelssohn's translation of the Pentateuch (Berlin, 1783) in High German and in Hebrew characters.

78 See, for example, Gillman (1998), 106: “However, the Buber-Rosenzweig Bible was never intended for Jewish Germans alone; it is still used in Germany today. Nor has the Holocaust rendered Buber and Rosenzweig's enterprise obsolete, as witnessed by the recent publication of volume 1 of the Schocken Bible, an English translation of the Pentateuch based upon the Buber-Rosenzweig method.”

79 Cha (1991), 29; see also, *ibid.*: “English was far less predominant than was French or German until 1920, but it gradually surpassed German and French and became the most predominant first modern foreign language after 1945.”

80 De Barry (2013), 26; and 57 (in the chapter “What is ‘Classic?’”); see also Baker (2014), 202, quoting the following 1931 report: “Departing from its practice during the 230 years of its existence, Yale University announced today that hereafter the study of the classics is not required for the degree of bachelor of arts, and the degree of bachelor of philosophy will be discontinued ... [Greek, Latin, and Hebrew] will be replaced by modern languages. Yale News predicts that ‘when no longer tied to academic apron strings Greek and Hebrew [would fall] ... and the rigors of [a] competitive and practical age will exact their toll upon Latin.’ Freshman celebrated by holding a parade which ended with a huge bonfire into which they tossed Latin and Greek grammars.”

81 Christopher S. Celenza, “Humanism,” *The Classical Tradition*.

82 Women poets appear mainly in the chapter on Black poetry (ch. 3, Rankine); see also in the chapter on the Imagists (ch. 4, Vandiver); on Giovanna Bemporad, see the chapter on Italian poetry (ch. 9, Gardini; also below); on Lea Goldberg, see the chapter on Hebrew poetry (ch. 8, Ticotsky; also above).

(some of them, such as Pascoli (ch. 9, Gardini), were also involved themselves in the school system), and, in general, came from middle-class backgrounds.⁸³ The chapter on Black poetry (ch. 3, Rankine) provides the greatest number of exceptions: after all, the first African American author of a published book of poems (in 1773), Phillis Wheatley, was an enslaved woman; and the African American Ruth Ellen Kocher (b. 1965) is the youngest poet in the volume, born well after the Second World War.

Familiarity with Latin (which was characterized as the “European sign” by Joseph de Maistre in 1819)⁸⁴ is a trait of almost all poets in the volume. But the same does not apply to Greek, even in the case of poets referring to Greek themes or even quoting phrases in Greek, like René Char (ch. 5, James) or Jacob Fichman, who wrote the poem “On Reading Homer” (ch. 8, Ticotsky). It is no accident that Keats’s sonnet “On First Looking into Chapman’s Homer” acquired a special significance in the twentieth century, as is also evident in the chapters of the present volume (ch. 2, Yeh; ch. 7, Tambakaki; ch. 8, Ticotsky). If in his 1861 lectures “On Translating Homer,” the Victorian poet and cultural critic Matthew Arnold (whom we encounter in the chapter on Hebrew literature; ch. 8, Ticotsky) stressed that “Keats could not read the [Homeric] original, and therefore could not really judge [Chapman’s] translation,” for twentieth-century poets Keats’s sonnet is singularly, in Borges’s words, “a poem written about the poetic experience itself.”⁸⁵

In any discussion about poetry translation, the questions of “what gets lost” and “what is gained” in translation, of translatability and untranslatability, have a particular edge relating to the notion of poetic rhythm, or the “music of poetry,” as a distinctive attribute of poetry. We see how important and at the same time how elusive this “music” is in Lorca’s *cante jondo* (ch. 11, Bonaddio) or Ezra Pound’s attempts to define *vers libre* in relation to Li Po or the sound of the Greek language (see above; ch. 4, Vandiver). Eliot, in *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*, his Charles Eliot Norton Lectures at Harvard University in 1932–1933, provided further examples, which have attracted much attention (and criticism), such as his remark that “Poetry, I dare say, begins with a savage beating a drum in the jungle;” or his definition of the “auditory imagination” in his lecture on Matthew Arnold: “What I call the ‘auditory imagination’ is the feeling for syllable and rhythm, penetrating far below the conscious levels of thought and feeling, invigorating every word; sinking to the most primitive and

83 On the question of class and the classics in Britain and Ireland, see Hall and Stead (2020).

84 Françoise Waquet, “Latin language,” *The Classical Tradition*.

85 Arnold (1986), 112; and Borges (2000), 4–5 and 66.

forgotten, returning to the origin and bringing something back, seeking the beginning and the end.”⁸⁶

The connection between poetic rhythm and the subconscious – or what in her *Revolution in Poetic Language* (1974) the Bulgarian-French philosopher and writer Julia Kristeva calls (after Plato) the *chora*, a womb space which, “as rupture and articulations (rhythm), precedes evidence, verisimilitude, spatiality, and temporality”⁸⁷ – relates to another question, that of a poet’s “mother tongue.” It is perhaps in the case of the Jewish German-language poet Paul Celan – and the imaginary place Kristeva called after him “Celanian”⁸⁸ – that this question is posed in the most dramatic way. A multilingual, Celan settled in Paris after the Second World War and became a French citizen. He became friends with poets such as René Char and Yves Bonnefoy, and collaborated in the poetry journal *L’Éphémère*, participating in the literary milieu which is the subject of the chapter on French poetry and the Presocratic philosophers (ch. 5, James). But the language of Celan’s poetry remained German, a sort of Muttersprache-Mördersprache (mother language – murder language),⁸⁹ since German was his mother tongue, but also the language of his mother’s persecutors and murderers in the Holocaust. For Celan, poetic breath acquired a special importance. In a note to his major speech on poetry with the geographical title “The Meridian,” Celan wrote: “What’s on the lung, put on the tongue, my mother used to say. Which has to do with breath. One should finally learn how to also read this breath, this breath-unit in the poem; in the cola meaning is often more truthfully joined and fugued than in the rhyme; shape of the poem: that is the presence of the single, breathing one.”⁹⁰ By using the term “cola” (Kolen), Celan referred not only to a technical poetic term (in verse, a portion of a strophe, with colometry going back to the Alexandrian grammarians), but also to the original Greek meaning of the word (a limb) and the Buber-Rosenzweig translation of the Hebrew Bible: in the latter, Biblical verses were segmented into “breath units” or “cola” (Kolen), giving the impression of being “a rendition of scripture into blank verse.”⁹¹

What the Jewish Russian-language poet Osip Mandelstam (himself a multilingual, whom Celan translated into German) wrote about the interaction between native and foreign languages, in his essay “Conversation about Dante,” is telling: “For us as foreigners it is difficult to penetrate to the ultimate secret

86 Eliot (1933), 118–19.

87 Kristeva (1984), 26.

88 Kristeva (2001; it was reprinted in *La Haine et le pardon* as “Celanie”).

89 See Buck (1993).

90 Celan (2011), 108.

91 Barzilai (2019), 437.

of an alien poetry. It is not for us to judge; the last word cannot be ours. But in my opinion it is precisely here that we find that captivating pliability of the Italian language, which only the ear of a native Italian can fully grasp." But what makes Mandelstam able to make this statement about "the ear of the native Italian" is precisely his own native language: "Here I am quoting Marina Tsvetaeva," Mandelstam adds, "who once mentioned 'the pliability of Russian speech.'"⁹² An equally dense statement is found in Eliot's famous dedication of *The Waste Land* to Ezra Pound, with a quotation from Dante: "For Ezra Pound il miglior fabbro." In Dante the full line reads: "Il miglior fabbro del parlar materno" (*Purgatorio*, 26.428), "the best craftsman of the mother tongue."

"I think of translation as a special kind of deep reading," wrote in 2007 the poet A. E. Stallings speaking of the homophonic translations of Catullus by Louis Zukofsky and his wife, Celia, who experimented on conveying both the meaning and the sounds, rhythms and syntax of the Latin original into English.⁹³ Louis Zukofsky is a rare case of a modern poet writing in English, although his native language was Yiddish. Unlike him, almost all poets dealt with in the present volume wrote in their native language – although the cases of early modern Hebrew poets such as Tchernichovsky (ch. 8, Ticotsky), who was born and raised in the Russian Empire, or of Caribbean poets writing in their native creole, show that this is far from a straightforward matter. In the chapter on Black poetry (ch. 3, Rankine) we read, for example, the lines "ova centuries / di rapso man / calypso man" by the dub and performance poet Mbala: the words "rapso" and "calypso," which can easily evoke Homer in a reader of *World Poetry*, are forms of Afro-Caribbean music. Within this context, keeping in mind how blurry such distinctions can be, we could say that only a few poets featuring in the present volume, such as Gibran (ch. 1, DeYoung), Rilke (ch. 6, Louth), and Nishiwaki (ch. 10, Yatsushashi), also wrote in a language other than their native one.

The great majority of poets dealt with in the volume were involved themselves in translation from other "living" languages, and many of them (like Zukofsky, above) in projects of translation of Greek and/or Latin texts too. Nishiwaki was one of them, as we saw, with his highly experimental "translatory acts" of *Ambarvalia* (ch. 10, Yatsushashi). Again, Sulayman al-Bustani's translation of the entire *Iliad* in Arabic is considered an overwhelming achievement, especially taking into account the challenges posed by the monorhyme system of Arabic poetry (ch. 1, DeYoung); and Tchernichovsky's translations of the complete *Iliad* and *Odyssey* into Hebrew made him "the 'Greek' and 'heathen'

92 Mandelstam (1977), 25 (trans. C. Brown and R. Hughes).

93 Poetry Foundation (website).

poet of modern Hebrew literature" (ch. 8, Ticotsky). Both Tchernichovsky and Bustani earned recognition for providing counterparts of the dactylic hexameters of the Homeric epics in Hebrew and Arabic respectively. Of Western poets, the Swiss Francophone poet Philippe Jaccottet (ch. 5, James) was also a prolific translator of modern poets (among them, of Giuseppe Ungaretti, Rilke, and Mandelstam) and of Homer's *Odyssey* into fourteen-syllable verses. But in addition to the chapter on Nishiwaki (ch. 10, Yatsushashi), it is the chapter on Italian poetry that provides the most examples of such translation projects, with two sections even bearing the word "translation" in their titles: the section on the Nobel laureate Salvatore Quasimodo, and that on the much lesser-known Giovanna Bemporad (one of the few female poets in the volume,⁹⁴ who, like Jaccottet, also represents both twentieth and twentieth-first century poetic production), whose "work is now receiving more critical attention, but her canonization is still far from being complete" (ch. 9, Gardini).

If modern Italy is connected with one of the "cores" of the Graeco-Roman world,⁹⁵ the question of place and time in relation to poetics and translation is posed most powerfully by a poet speaking from, and of, the edges of the so-called European civilization. In a "Letter" (1995) addressed to the Roman lyric poet and author of *Ars Poetica*, Horace [Quintus Horatius Flaccus], the Nobel prize-winning Russian exile and U.S. poet laureate Joseph Brodsky wrote: "you may be entertained by [the letter's] coming to you from a part of the world whose existence you never suspected, and some two thousand years after your death, at that."⁹⁶ The "letter" is written in English, describes a dream experience triggered by the reading of Horace in a Russian translation, and says about the theme of measuring time: "Two thousand years – of what? By whose count, Flaccus? Certainly not in terms of metrics. Tetrameters are tetrameters, no matter when and no matter where. Be they in Greek, Latin, Russian, English. So are dactyls, and so are anapests. Et cetera."⁹⁷ Again, in his essay "The Child of Civilization" (1977), writing of Mandelstam's "nostalgia for a world culture," Brodsky noted: "In order to understand his poetry better, the English-speaking reader perhaps ought to realize that Mandelstam was a Jew who was living in the capital of Imperial Russia, whose dominant religion was Orthodoxy, whose political structure was inherently Byzantine, and whose alphabet had

94 See above, p. 22 n. 82.

95 About "cores" and "peripheries" of "European Modernism," see Lewis (2011).

96 Brodsky (1995), 428. Brodsky makes use of the meaning of the ancient Greek word "metron" (meter), measure.

97 Brodsky (1995), 441.

been devised by two Greek monks.”⁹⁸ Brodsky defined civilization as “the sum total of different cultures animated by a common spiritual numerator, and its main vehicle – speaking both metaphorically and literally – is translation. The wandering of a Greek portico into the latitude of the tundra is a translation.”⁹⁹

In Brodsky’s last sentence the question of material culture and space is posed in relation to the porticoes of the St. Petersburg Admiralty (and Mandelstam’s poem “The Admiralty”) or what Brodsky characteristically called “the mediatinum of this Russian Hellenicism.”¹⁰⁰ In various chapters of the present volume the question of material culture and space is touched upon in relation to Graeco-Roman remains.

4 Material Culture, Genius Loci and Technology, Myths and Philosophy

Lorca’s first “artistic wonder,” as he himself would later relate, was the view, at the age of eight, of a Roman mosaic unearthed from the soil of Fuente Vaqueros, in the province of Granada, by the blade of a plough (ch. 11, Bonaddio). Later Lorca associated this image with the second/third-century CE pastoral romance *Daphnis and Chloe* by Longus. The chapter on Lorca opens with this “artistic wonder” that “identifies Andalusia as a very real site of antiquity,” posing the questions of “mythic universality” in relation to locality – or, in other words, in relation to local spirit, what the Romans called “the genius of the place” (*genius loci*), referring to the local presiding deity. Andalusia’s “spirit” included Gypsy elements, famously emerging even in the title of Lorca’s poetry collection *Gypsy Ballads* (one of the first works of Western literature Yang Mu translated into Chinese; ch. 2, Yeh), in which allusions are also made to Andalusia’s “Roman, Moorish and Judaic past” (ch. 11, Bonaddio). About Andalusia’s Judaic past, in the chapter on Hebrew poetry we encounter the poet and philosopher Judah Halevi, from the Hebrew Golden Age in Spain (mid-tenth to mid-eleventh century; ch. 8, Ticotsky). As for its Moorish elements, going back to Al-Andalus (or Muslim Spain), in the chapter on Arabic poetry (ch. 1, DeYoung) we find references to the Andalusian philosophers of the twelfth and thirteenth

98 Brodsky (1986), 130. Brodsky refers to Mandelstam’s definition of Acmeism (also translated as “yearning for a world culture;” see, for example, Cavanagh (1995), 6).

99 Brodsky (1986), 139.

100 Brodsky (1986), 130.

centuries Hazim al-Qartajanni and Ibn Rushd, known in the West as Averroes (see also below).

In the chapter on Arabic poetry, we also see how the impressive Roman ruins of Baalbek in Lebanon (since 1984, another UNESCO-World Heritage site),¹⁰¹ which was excavated and restored under the patronage of Kaiser Wilhelm II at the end of the nineteenth century, provided the theme and title of the poem “Baalbek Castle” (1899) by the Lebanese-Egyptian poet Khalil Mutran, a native of Baalbek (ch. 1, DeYoung). Images of ruins, bound up with questions of identity and imperial power, are also found in Seferis’s poems (ch. 7, Tambakaki). His poem “Enkomi” (1955) revolves around the excavation of an ancient city in colonial Cyprus, which Seferis witnessed on a visit to the island that functioned as a memory trip back to his childhood on the coasts of Asia Minor.

But the spirit of a place can also be strongly felt by one who has no intimate relationship to that specific locality or even by one who has never visited it – it can be the spirit of an imaginary place. As we see in the chapter on the Imagists (ch. 4, Vandiver), H.[ilda] D.[oolittle] spoke of her Hellas as a “Lotus-land [...]. It is nostalgia for a lost land,” as Vandiver says: “The Greece [the Imagists] claimed proudly as their ancestor and inspiration was, to a great extent, an imaginary ‘Hellas’ that existed only in and through their own creation of it.” In his *Sketches in Italy and Greece* (1874), John Addington Symonds, the great admirer and scholar of the Italian Renaissance, devoted only one chapter (out of seventeen) to Greece, entitled “Athens.” But he wrote in the chapter “Syracuse and Girgenti”: “The spirit of Hellas is indestructible, however much the material existence of the Greeks be lost beyond recovery.”¹⁰² About half a century earlier, Shelley had expressed “the debt of the modern world to ancient Hellas”¹⁰³ in the famous statement from his Preface to *Hellas: A Lyrical Drama* (1821): “We are all Greeks – our laws, our literature, our religion, our arts have their root in Greece. But for Greece, Rome, the instructor, the conqueror, or the metropolis of our ancestors would have spread no illumination with her arms, and we might still have been savages and idolaters.” Shelley never visited Greece – or China or Japan, for that matter, to which he referred immediately afterwards: “or, what is worse, [we] might have arrived at such a stagnant and miserable state of social institution as China and Japan possess.”¹⁰⁴ Unlike the first part of Shelley’s statement, about Greece and Rome, the phrase about China and Japan is not frequently quoted in the bibliography. But it arguably

101 UNESCO 3 (website).

102 Symonds (1874), 194.

103 In Symonds’s words, in his biography of Shelley: Symonds (1881), 155.

104 Shelley (2017), 513.

constitutes part of Yang Mu's subtle dialogue with Shelley's Hellenism in his own poem "Hellas," as we see in the present volume (ch. 2, Yeh).

Traveling statues or other artifacts, together with relevant narratives, play a determining role in the shaping of mental maps. We have already seen the role played by texts and ancient statues in the inspiration of Shelley's "Ozymandias" and Rossetti's "The Burden of Nineveh." In their combinations of displaced artifacts and accompanying narratives, museums have their own *genius loci*, which is felt differently by each visitor, in different circumstances and socio-political contexts.¹⁰⁵ For example, in today's attempts to "decolonize the classics" (in both the fields of classics and modern literary studies), dark stories have been included on the official webpage of the British Museum, "The first national public museum of the world."¹⁰⁶ We thus read about the collection of Sir Hans Sloane, which constituted the basis of the Museum collection in 1753: "Sloane had used developing global networks created by European imperial expansion to collect these materials and financed the purchases with income partly derived from enslaved labour on Jamaican sugar plantations"¹⁰⁷ – that is, from ancestors of Jamaican poets dealt with in the chapter on Black poetry (ch. 3, Rankine).

The coronavirus pandemic has been a watershed for the "virtual aura" of Museums, putting its mark on the reception of material culture and the connection between art and memory in the twenty-first century. It has also thrown into relief the fact that the overwhelming majority of poets dealt with in the present volume belong to the pre-digital period of museums and archaeological sites. It is worth looking, for example, at Rilke, in whose work ancient artifacts play a key role, as is evident in the lines from his *Sonnets to Orpheus* containing the phrase found in the title of the relevant chapter in the present volume: "In the background / the aqueducts' descent [der Aquädukte Herkunft]. From far away, / past tombs, from the Apennines' slope" (ch. 6, Louth). For Rilke, the view of ancient remnants and visits to archaeological sites and museums were powerful sources of inspiration. And, like Kahlil Gibran (ch. 1, DeYoung), Rilke too was deeply influenced by his relationship with the sculptor Auguste Rodin (ch. 6, Louth).

105 Cf. the chapter on Italian poetry (ch. 9, Gardini) about D'Annunzio: "D'Annunzio operated like a collector of antiques. The purpose of collecting is making a collection, where each piece [...] is totally integrated into the present actuality of the collector's room. Also, a collection is never finished; it lends itself by definition to inexhaustible additions. This is indeed the case with D'Annunzio's literary debts to the ancients [...]."

106 British Museum 1 (website).

107 British Museum 2 (website).

The 2018 British Museum exhibition “Rodin and the Art of Ancient Greece” powerfully reminded the visitor that Rodin’s “self-assigned spiritual and artistic mentor” was the ancient Greek sculptor Pheidias: “No artist will ever surpass Pheidias,” Rodin stated in 1911.¹⁰⁸ Part of the British Museum exhibition’s aura was that Rodin’s admiration was not the result of a visit to the Parthenon in Athens (Rodin never came to Greece), but of his visits, from 1881 to 1917, to the British Museum and its Elgin Marbles gallery (see also above). It was in this way that Rodin was traveling mentally to Greece: “All of our France is in our cathedrals, just as all of Greece is summarized in the Parthenon,” he wrote; “Ah Greece! I think of her at once whenever I feel on my lips this honey of admiration of beauty.”¹⁰⁹ But Rodin was also using photography extensively (a relatively new technology at the time), as is evident in his personal exhibition, at Le Pavillon de l’Alma, in the context of the 1900 Paris Exhibition:¹¹⁰ the Rodin Exhibition included seventy-one photographs displayed next to Rodin’s sculptures and drawings.¹¹¹

In the present volume a 1964 poem about the goddess to whom the Parthenon was dedicated, Yang Mu’s “To Athena,” was inspired by a bronze statue of the goddess, which the poet had seen in a photograph (ch. 2, Yeh). Nishiwaki’s poem “Platter” about the Dionysus Kylix (which may be considered the first Japanese *ekphrasis*) (ch. 10, Yatsushashi) or Lorca’s allusion to the statue “Laocoön and his Sons” in his poem “Prickly Pear” (ch. 11, Bonaddio) in all probability have also originated in designs or photographs found in books and not in visits to the Museums where the two artifacts (the Dionysus Kylix and “Laocoön and his Sons”) are exhibited, the Staatliche Antikensammlungen in Munich and the Vatican Museums in Vatican city respectively. But these cases seem to be the exceptions to the rule: most of the statues or ruins evoked or referred to in the present volume relate to a live/physical experience of an ancient artifact or site. This applies, for example, to three poems on Apollo – the “Olympian god of prophecy, of the arts and sciences, of medicine, of shepherds and animal husbandry, and since the 5th century BCE also the sun god”:¹¹² “Before the Statue of Apollo” by Tchernichovsky, inspired by a copy of the Apollo Belvedere found in the University of Heidelberg (ch. 8, Ticotsky), and the two Apollo sonnets by Rilke, “Early Apollo” and “Archaic Torso of Apollo,” each opening the two volumes of Rilke’s *New Poems*. The second volume in particular was dedicated to Rodin: “A mon grand ami Auguste Rodin” (ch. 6, Louth).

108 British Museum 5 (blog).

109 Rodin (1981), 14, 26, 61.

110 See above, pp. 9–11.

111 Rodin Museum (website).

112 Timo Gunther, “Apollo,” *The Classical Tradition*.

The Greek god Apollo, who “was both a healer and the bringer of disease” and whose temple at Delphi bore the inscription “Know yourself,” as modern scholars point out,¹¹³ is one of the two key figures in an antithesis which has been central to modern philosophical and aesthetic discussions: between the Apollonian spirit, that of harmony, calm and purity, on the one hand, and the Dionysian spirit (connected with the god Dionysus; see the Dionysus Kylix above), that of intoxication, disorder and ecstasy, on the other hand. In his *Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Music* (1872) Friedrich Nietzsche made the tension and fusion of the two spirits the generative force of the Athenian drama, an idea that has proved extremely influential. The present volume confirms this: Nietzsche’s distinction between the Apollonian and the Dionysian appears in various chapters (ch. 1, DeYoung; ch. 6, Louth; ch. 8, Ticotsky; ch. 9, Gardini; ch. 11, Bonaddio).

Apollo is one of the most beloved gods in the Graeco-Roman classical tradition, also through his love pursuits and affairs and his many children. His famous relationship to Daphne, for example, and the latter’s metamorphosis is a theme we also encounter in the present volume, in D’Annunzio’s “Dithyramb 1” from the collection *Alcyone* (a title itself related to Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*; ch. 9, Gardini) and Lorca’s “Invocation to the Laurel” (ch. 11, Bonaddio). As for Apollo’s son with the Muse Calliope, Orpheus, he has exerted a strong appeal for poets and artists, as “the quintessential mythical singer.”¹¹⁴ Orpheus’ journey to the underworld to bring back his beloved Eurydice is famous, as is his gruesome death by frenzied maenads, who tore him limb from limb. Directly or indirectly, Orpheus makes many and seminal appearances in the present volume: from Lorca’s *Lament for Ignacio Sánchez Mejías* (ch. 11, Bonaddio) to “David and Orpheus” by Shin Shalom (ch. 8, Ticotsky); the city of Orphalese in Gibran’s *The Prophet* and Adunis’s poem “Orpheus” in his *Songs of Mihyar the Damascene* (ch. 1, DeYoung); last but not least, in Rilke’s “Orpheus. Eurydice. Hermes,” and, of course, in his *Sonnets to Orpheus* (ch. 6, Louth).

But among the many other myths in the volume, we find another, less well-known son of Apollo, Iamus, offspring of the god and the nymph Evadne. In fact, two poems in the volume have Evadne as their title: “Évadné” by René Char (ch. 5, James) and “Evadne” by H. D. (on whom, see ch. 4, Vandiver). But it is in the poem “Pindar’s Ode – 472 BCE” by Yang Mu that the myth of Iamus and questions of female agency are more directly touched upon in combination with the theme of the classical tradition, both Graeco-Roman and Chinese (ch. 2,

113 See above, pp. 8 and 12, in relation to Christakis (2020) and Beard and Henderson (1996).

114 Fritz Graf, “Orpheus,” *OCD*. In another version of the myth, Orpheus’ father was the river god Oeagrus.

Yeh). Pindaric encounters are here particularly telling (as were Hölderlin's Pindar translations for Rilke; see ch. 6, Louth). The title of "Pindar's Ode" stresses the fact that Pindar's *Olympian 6* is the only ancient source of the myth of Iamus. At the same time, as Yeh shows, similarities can be drawn between the Greek myth of Iamus and the Chinese myth of Hou Ji. The latter appears in the oldest anthology of Chinese poetry, allegedly compiled by Confucius, namely *The Book of Songs* or *Classic of Poetry* (*Shijing*), and more specifically in a sequence of five poems which Yang Mu called the *Weniad*. Although the very name "Weniad" points to Virgil's *Aeneid*, Yang Mu noted that "collectively, the poems are comparable [...] to the victory odes of Pindar or Bacchylides." What we read in Yang Mu's poem "Pindar's Ode – 472 BCE" applies to both Pindar's Ode and the story of Hou Ji in *The Book of Songs*: the mothers of both Iamus and Hou Ji have been "overlooked in the rhetoric and rhymes of poetry" (ch. 2, Yeh).

But one of the mythical heroes with the most pervasive and versatile presence in modern world poetry, and in the present volume too, is a mortal whose twenty-year absence from his native island, Ithaca, including his ten-year peregrinations after the Trojan War, is the subject of Homer's *Odyssey*: Odysseus or Ulysses in Latin. We have already encountered Seferis's poem "Upon a Line of Foreign Verse" and its dialogue with du Bellay's sonnet "Heureux qui, comme Ulysse," and Lea Goldberg's "The Lament of Odysseus" (see above). Of the many other examples in the volume, let us only mention Sinbad, the famous Arabic counterpart of Odysseus in *The Thousand and One* (or *Arabian*) *Nights*. In the chapter on Arabic poetry, Odysseus has a prominent place, not least in the section "Odysseus and Sinbad," with reference (among other things) to the monumental translation of the *Iliad* by Sulayman al-Bustani (see above), the figure of Odysseus in Adunis's *Songs of Mihyar the Damascene* and the feeling of *al-ghurbah* (feeling alienated, like a stranger or exile) (ch. 1, DeYoung).

The journeys, quests, hopes and fears of Odysseus are bound up with questions about the human condition and perception of the world, which are key questions of both poetry and philosophy. It is noteworthy, Silvia Montiglio says, that the name given time and again to Odysseus by the twelfth-century Byzantine bishop and commentator of Homer, Eustathius of Thessalonica, is "the philosopher."¹¹⁵ The relationship between poetry and philosophy is complex and intimate, as Borges shows in the case of Buber.¹¹⁶ Let us only bring to mind, in addition to Buber, the many other philosophers mentioned in this introduction, starting with Diogenes the Cynic and his phrase "I am a

¹¹⁵ Montiglio (2011), 1, and more generally on Odysseus in ancient thought.

¹¹⁶ See above, p. 21.

cosmopolites,” on which Appiah comments: “The formulation was meant to be paradoxical, and reflected the general Cynic skepticism toward custom and tradition.”¹¹⁷ If we believe the available sources, Diogenes – the “mad Socrates” – was an enthusiastic admirer of Odysseus.¹¹⁸

Poetry as a way of seeing things in a completely different, fresh, and original way is the subject of a popular short essay by Pascoli entitled “The Little Child,” *Il fanciullino*, inspired by a passage of Plato’s *Phaedo* about the “child within us,” as we read in the chapter on Italian poetry (ch. 9, Gardini). But it is in the chapter on French poetry (ch. 5, James) that the engagement of modern poets with philosophy is placed at the center of discussion. The chapter sketches out “the genealogy of a Presocratic French poetics that simultaneously aspires to unite poetry and thought, and struggles against the mirages of language, abstraction, and conceptual thinking.” Not unexpectedly, Martin Heidegger appears in the title of one of the chapter’s sections: “‘The Poetry of Inspired Thought’: Char, Heraclitus, and Heidegger.”

Heidegger’s “Being-in-the-world” plays an important role in discussions about world literature and translation, as in Emily Apter’s *Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability*. There Heidegger’s affirmation that the concept of World “means the accessibility of beings as such rather than beings in themselves” is combined with Abdelfattah Kilito’s statement: “The history of philosophy is at its core the history of translation.”¹¹⁹

We have already seen the Hebrew story about the alleged appropriation of King Solomon’s library by the Greek philosopher Aristotle through copying and translation.¹²⁰ Kilito too refers to Aristotle and translation, but in this case the reference relates to the translation of Aristotle’s works, among them the *Poetics*, and more precisely to the role played by Averroes (see ch. 1, DeYoung). “Until the Renaissance, Ibn Rushd’s [= Averroes’s] commentary was the primary medium through which the *Poetics* reached Europe. It was translated into Latin in 1256 by Hermannus Alemannus [...] who relied on the assistance of the ‘Saracens’ residing at that time in Toledo.”¹²¹ In the time of Dante (who was born nine years after the Latin translation of Averroes’s commentary by Hermannus Alemannus) Aristotle was thus known in the West thanks to the intervention of the Arab Andalusian philosopher. In his essay “Conversation about Dante,” Mandelstam points precisely to this:

117 Appiah (2006), xiv.

118 Montiglio (2011), 66.

119 Apter (2013), 9, quoting from Heidegger (1995), 280, and Kilito (2006), 9.

120 See above, p. 19.

121 Gould (2014), 1, commenting on Kilito’s views of Averroes’s intervention. See also Halliwell (1998), 290–2.

What is Dantean erudition?

Aristotle, like a downy butterfly, is fringed with the Arabian border of Averroës.

Averroës, che il gran comento feo.

Inferno, IV, 144

[...]

The end of Canto IV of the *Inferno* is a genuine orgy of quotations. I find here a pure and unalloyed demonstration of Dante's keyboard of allusions. It is a keyboard promenade around the entire mental horizon of antiquity.¹²²

Canto IV of the *Inferno* refers to "that first circle girding the abyss" (Limbo),¹²³ in which Dante places an extraordinary multicultural list of virtuous non-Christians: Hebrews, Greeks, Romans, Muslims. On the list, the group of poets (in which the soul of Dante's guide, Virgil, normally resides) opens with Homer: "That one is Homer, Poet sovereign."¹²⁴ The group of philosophers is placed last on the list, with the name of Averroës appearing at the very end, in the line quoted by Mandelstam: "Averroës, of the great Commentary."¹²⁵ Among the philosophers mentioned before Averroës, we encounter Avicenna (the Latin name of Ibn-Sīnā; see ch. 1, DeYoung), Presocratic philosophers (see ch. 5, James), Socrates and Plato (see also ch. 7, Tambakaki; ch. 9, Gardini), and Diogenes – with most certainty, the Cynic: the "mad Socrates" and a *cosmopolites*.

5 Presences and Absences, Specificity and Universality, and Pamuk's Fictional Poet Ka

The present volume has been designed to include chapters representing a variety of themes and approaches from both the fields of classics and modern literary studies, dealing with poetry from various linguistic and cultural traditions, and paying attention to both the universality and cultural specificity of

¹²² Mandelstam (1977), 7 (trans. C. Brown and R. Hughes). See also Dimock (2001).

¹²³ Mandelbaum's translation.

¹²⁴ Longfellow's translation.

¹²⁵ Mandelbaum's translation.

poems.¹²⁶ The final shape of the volume has also been determined by chance, relating to both the pandemic and personal adversities, which eventually prevented two scholars from participating in the project. But by definition any such project can only point to infinite absences: to an endless number of poets from different traditions and languages, and to endlessly different approaches to world literature and the classical reception that could have been included in the volume. Suffice it only to mention the modern poets who appear in this introduction but are not dealt with in the chapters of the volume: Auden, Borges, Brodsky, Celan, Chawla, C. Dabydeen, Mandelstam, Satchidanandan, Tsvetaeva, Ukrainka, Zukofsky, or Ernesto Fenollosa with his collection *East and West*, or A. E. Stallings, whose afterword to this volume adds a further dimension to it: the reaction of a poet to reading a book on classical reception like the present one. It might be worth looking at some further possible cases and constellations of poets.

For example, in addition to the Imagists (ch. 4, Vandiver) or the French poets involved in Presocratic philosophy (ch. 5, James), poets who are also accomplished artists (like Gibran, see ch. 1, DeYoung) might have constituted another group to be dealt with in such a project; or poets who have received major international literary awards, such as the Nobel Prize, and are also diplomats. Suffice it only to remember how Goethe juxtaposed the idea of *Weltliteratur* with “national literature”¹²⁷ to find this last category particularly challenging, since these poets combine a strong national professional identity and a membership in the so-called “World Republic of Letters.”¹²⁸ So far, in addition to Seferis (Nobel prize, 1963; ch. 7, Tambakaki), this small group of poets includes Saint-John Perse from France (1960); Ivo Andrić from (the then) Yugoslavia (1961); the Polish-American Czesław Miłosz (1980); Gabriela Mistral and Pablo Neruda from Chile (1945 and 1971 respectively); Miguel Ángel Asturias from Guatemala (1967); and Octavio Paz from Mexico (1990). A study in classical reception focusing on the last four Spanish-language poet-diplomats from Latin America would certainly have a strong postcolonial edge.¹²⁹ Although postcolonialism informs many chapters of the present volume, it is mainly in those on Arabic poetry (ch. 1, DeYoung) and Black poetry (ch. 3, Rankine), and the section on Seferis’s Cypriot poems (ch. 7, Tambakaki) that it is more conspicuous.

126 See Damrosch (2003), 164.

127 See above, p. 1.

128 Cf. Casanova (2004). Cf. Watkins (2015).

129 Cf. Tomes (2021) and Laird and Miller (2018).

Other possible lines of investigation might include: Lusophone poets such as the Brazilian Haroldo de Campos; from Australia, the aboriginal poet Oodgeroo Noonuccal; from the Indian subcontinent, the Bengali poet Rabindranath Tagore, the first non-European Nobel laureate (1913), who, according to the Nobel committee, “made his poetic thought, expressed in his own English words, a part of the literature of the West;”¹³⁰ the poet-philosopher Muhammad Iqbal, who wrote poetry in Urdu and Persian, with his *Message to the East* being a response to Goethe’s *Divan of West and East* and his *Song of Eternity* being reminiscent of Dante’s *Divine Comedy*; or the Tamil poet Subramania Bharati. From Africa, such a project might include the Zulu poet (*imbongi*) Mazisi Kunene and the way in which he treated African cosmology; or the French-language Senegalese author and politician Léopold Sédar Senghor, together with Jean-Paul Sartre’s article “Black Orpheus” (the preface to a poetic collection edited by Senghor, 1948); or poems by different authors which were published in the pan-African English-language journal *Black Orpheus* (named after Sartre’s article). Again, poems published in journals from different linguistic and artistic environments with the god Apollo in their title could provide another line of inquiry. Suffice it only to mention the Arabic journal *Apollo* (ch. 1, DeYoung) and the journal *Apollo* of the Russian Acmeists (among them Mandelstam).

Such a kaleidoscopic approach might even include fictional poets – a category which also touches upon the very questions: what do we really mean by “poetry”? How do we conceive of the distinction between poetry and prose? I would like to close this introduction with one such case, which encapsulates almost all of the themes touched upon so far: the fictional poet Ka, the protagonist of Pamuk’s novel *Snow*.

Pamuk’s novel focuses on the poet Ka’s short visit to the border city of Kars in easternmost Anatolia, once “an important station on the trade route to Georgia, Tabriz, and the Caucasus [...] on the border between two empires now defunct, the Ottoman and the Russian.” Kars had been the home of many different peoples: in addition to Ottomans, Armenians, Persians, Greeks, Georgians, Kurds, Circassians, and Russians had also lived there.¹³¹ The novel describes how Ka’s visit provided poetic inspiration, bringing about the poems of his collection *Snow*. This was Ka’s last collection before his death, an assassination, which took place in Frankfurt, where Ka had lived as a political exile for sixteen years.¹³²

130 Nobel Prize 3 (website).

131 Pamuk (2005), 19–20, 132.

132 See below, p. 40 n. 146.

Ka is a modern poet of the pre-internet period (his death is placed in the late-1990s), who, moreover, refrained from having his poems typed or copied, unless “he was sure everything was in its rightful place.”¹³³ Thus when the only existing manuscript of his book was lost (in all probability stolen at the time of his death), the narrator, a Turkish novelist and friend of Ka named Orhan, was unable to retrieve the poems in their final form. Elements conspicuously relating to the Graeco-Roman tradition are scarce in the novel, but they are telling, nonetheless. Suffice it only to quote what Blue, an “infamous Islamist terrorist,”¹³⁴ told Ka about the tale of Rostam (or Rustum) and Sohrab, from Ferdowsi’s *Shahnameh*:

Once upon a time, millions of people knew it by heart – from Tabriz to Istanbul from Bosnia to Trabzon – and when they recalled it they found the meaning in their lives. The story spoke to them in just the same way that Oedipus’ murder of his father and Macbeth’s obsession with power and death speak to people throughout the Western world. But now, because we’ve fallen under the spell of the West, we’ve forgotten our own stories. They’ve removed all the old stories from our children’s textbooks. These days, you can’t find a single bookseller who stocks the *Shahnameh* in all of Istanbul!¹³⁵

Snow is a novel of presences and absences, and accordingly the importance of examining the question of Greek and Roman tradition and reception lies more in posing questions than in finding answers. Concerning the aforementioned passage, for example, one such question relates to the long poem “Sohrab and Rustum: An Episode” (1853) by Matthew Arnold, a mini-epic which played a key role in the European discovery of the *Shahnameh* and has been seen as a close analogue in English poetry to the manner of Homer.¹³⁶ In *Snow* we are provided with no indication of whether the poet Ka, or the narrator of *Snow*, the novelist Orhan, knew Arnold’s poem or Eliot’s lecture at Harvard on Arnold (in which “Sohrab and Rustum” is characterized as “a fine piece”),¹³⁷ or Auden’s poem “Matthew Arnold.” We are only told that Ka was fascinated by, and immersed in, English poetry. Speaking in first person singular, the narrator Orhan describes how he shed tears “whenever I opened a copy of Auden,

133 Pamuk (2005), 257.

134 Pamuk (2005), 27.

135 Pamuk (2005), 78 (where the spelling is *Shehname*).

136 Dabashi (2019), 15 and 37; cf. Hammond (2000), vii; Arnold’s poem is linked to his influential essay “On Translating Homer” (see above, p. 23).

137 Eliot (1922), 105. See also above, p. 23–4, on Eliot’s definition of the “auditory imagination.”

Browning, or Coleridge to find [Ka's] signature" on the checkout slips in the books in the English section of the Frankfurt city library.¹³⁸ All three English poets mentioned by the narrator here – Auden, Browning, and Coleridge – had a special relation to the Graeco-Roman tradition.

In *Snow* the question of the mother tongue, intertwined with the question of the music of poetry, is posed in a powerful way. In a key scene in the novel, when asked about what was hard for him in Germany, Ka replied: "The thing that saved me was not learning German [...] My body rejected the language, so I was able to preserve my purity and my soul." At the same time, he spoke "about the silence buried inside him," which had kept him from writing a single poem for four years prior to his visit to Kars.¹³⁹ In the novel we see how during his visit, Ka was able to "hear the poem's music in his head"¹⁴⁰ – a mystical experience which resulted in the creation of his collection *Snow*.

However, not a single line of Ka's poetry appears in the novel. This is astonishing indeed: for, although the final manuscript of Ka's collection *Snow* was lost, the narrator Orhan had managed to find Ka's diaries with extensive notes on the collection and even a videotaped recitation by Ka himself.¹⁴¹ And of course there were Ka's previous poetic collections, for which, we are told, Ka was awarded the prestigious prize in honor of the poet Behçet Necatigil¹⁴² (another poet to whom a chapter in a volume on the Graeco-Roman reception and modern world poetry could have been devoted). So the narrator was certainly able to provide examples of his friend's work. It seems not unreasonable to suggest that this absence relates to the question of translatability/untranslatability as regards poetry and prose, and more precisely to the question: "What does it really mean to speak of a 'world poetry'?" (to paraphrase Damrosch's words, quoted above).

What is certain is that in *Snow* we are told that the novels of the narrator Orhan (like those of Pamuk's) were well known in the West and we can assume (or rather confirm as readers of *Snow*) that Orhan's novel about his friend Ka would also be included in his internationally acclaimed output, through translations – especially through its translation into English. In this context, it seems no accident that the only verses quoted in the novel are three lines by Browning (see also above), in the mottos of the novel.¹⁴³ This means that in

138 Pamuk (2005), 252.

139 Pamuk (2005), 33.

140 Pamuk (2005), 118.

141 Pamuk (2005), 144, 257.

142 Pamuk (2005), 28.

143 The only other exceptions are a short poem Ka found written on the wall of a teahouse, which he would incorporate (as we are told) in one of his poems, and a further doggerel which was later scribbled on that same wall: Pamuk (2005), 102, 291.

the novel's English translation (that is, in the translation which would be pivotal to the novel's inscription in World Literature) Browning's verses appear in the original.

The question of *Weltliteratur* for a modern non-English-language author (like the poet Ka, the narrator Orhan and the novelist Orhan Pamuk, as well as the German-speaking novelist Franz Kafka, to whose novel *The Castle* and its protagonist "K." *Snow* alludes) seems to play a central role in Pamuk's novel – despite (or rather thanks to) the fact that the question is (again) posed through an absence. For in the whole novel not a single reference is made to the cultural *genius loci* of the city in which Ka had lived and died, in exile: Frankfurt, the native city of Goethe. Nowhere do we find, for example, the Goethe House, the Goethe-Universität, or the annual Frankfurt Book Fair (the famous Frankfurt Buchmesse).¹⁴⁴ We are only told of Ka's apartment in Goethestrasse, his visits to the Frankfurt City Library on the Zeil, and his personal library "of some three hundred and fifty books."¹⁴⁵ Interestingly, in the novel two further libraries appear – a sort of Turkish counterparts of the two Frankfurt libraries: the Kars public library and the libraries in Ka's family home in Istanbul. It is in the former that Ka read (or re-read) the entry about snow:

On page 324 of the same volume, he found an entry that he read with care:

SNOW. The solid form taken by water when falling, crossing, or rising through the atmosphere. Each crystal snowflake forms its own unique hexagon. Since ancient times, mankind has been awed and mystified by the secrets of snow. In 1555, a priest named Olaus Magnus in Uppsala, Sweden, discovered that each snowflake, as indicated in the diagram, has six corners ...

The hexagons of Borges's "The Library of Babel" can easily be brought to mind, as well as questions relating to the reception of Graeco-Roman antiquity in Renaissance Humanism. For one thing, the name itself of the Renaissance Swedish writer, cartographer and Catholic ecclesiastic Olaus Magnus was the Latinized form of his Swedish name Olof Månsson, who wrote his *History of the Northern Peoples* in Latin (*Historia de gentibus septentrionalibus*; published in 1555), living in Rome as an exile owing to religious clashes.

In this context, it comes as no surprise that in *Snow* no reference is made to the Peace Prize of the German Book Trade either – a prize awarded in the context of the Frankfurt Book Fair. But chronological indications show that Ka's

¹⁴⁴ See above, p. 7.

¹⁴⁵ Pamuk (2005), 33, 251, 254, 256.

death can be placed close to the award of the Peace Prize to the Turkish novelist Yaşar Kemal in October 1997,¹⁴⁶ and two years after the same prize was given to Annemarie Schimmel, a leading expert on Islam and Sufism. In 2005 Pamuk himself became the second Turkish writer after Yaşar Kemal to be awarded the Peace Prize, three years after the publication of *Snow* in Turkish and one year after the publication of the novel's English translation. In 2006 Pamuk received the Nobel Prize for literature, and in 2008, speaking at the Frankfurt Book Fair, in which Turkey was the country of honor, he said:

Like the great libraries of legend that contain all the books in the world, like the dreams of infinite libraries that suggest the infinity of time and the universe, an abundance of books warns us against arrogance and at the same time it reminds us that – though we are divided by nationality, history and language – all peoples resemble each other: we share the same sentiments and aspirations.¹⁴⁷

World literature relates to global visions and infinite vistas. The question of Graeco-Roman classical reception provides a specific angle from which to look at infinite interactions with, and within, what is called the West and Western literature. But if, like many other geographical terms, East and West are intimately connected with geopolitics, they are also the points of the horizon at which every human being looks for the rise and fall of the sun, and from where winds blow, be it the so-called (east-to-west) “trade winds” or those found in literature, starting from the world's earliest known poems, *The Epic of Gilgamesh* or Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* – always the same and always different, real, imaginary or virtual.

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¹⁴⁶ Temporal details given in the novel: Ka went to Germany as an exile at some point after the 1980 (September) coup in Turkey; twelve years had passed before Ka's visit to Kars; his death happened four years after his return to Germany from Kars: Pamuk (2005), 4, 33, 250, 256. About the Prize, see German Book Trade (website).

¹⁴⁷ Orhan Pamuk (website).

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On Modern Arabic Poetry and the Graeco-Roman Classical Tradition

Terri L. DeYoung

1 An Historical Overview

The first recorded references to poetry in the Arabic language (from the fourth century CE) are found in Greek historical chronicles.¹ This is the period following the foundation of the city of Constantinople, in 330 CE, as the capital of the eastern part of the Roman empire, which would become known as the Byzantium.² While Latin was still in use in Constantinople in the sixth century, “the main language, and the language of intellectual culture, in the east was already Greek, and while Latin soon fell away, Greek remained the primary language throughout the long history of Byzantium.”³ Yet, one of the enduring mysteries of literary history lies in the fact that these two rich literary traditions, the Arabic and the Greek, existing next to each other on the shores of the Mediterranean all through the Byzantine period, had relatively little contact

1 See Shahid ((2008), 152 n. 54) about Sozomen's statement that the battle between the Romans and the Arabs under their Queen Mavia was celebrated in his days (before 450) in songs [ὠδαίς] by the Arabs: “This is the earliest certain attestation for the composition of pre-Islamic Arabic poetry (around 375) and for the continual transmission of this poetry for at least seventy years after its composition.” See also van Bladel ((2018), 123–4) about the question of pre-Islamic Arabian literatures: “scholars of Arabic have assumed that nothing substantial was written in Arabic until the Qurʾān. There are, however, numerous ancient Arabian written texts, from late antiquity and from long before, and references to more, but lost, written material, enough to make one think again about pre-Islamic literacy. [...] there are tens of thousands of known inscriptions in various ancient Arabian languages [...] there are hundreds of poems preserved in early Arabic, thought to have originated from the seventh, sixth, and even the fifth century CE, as well as prose tales and moral exhortations deriving from the period [...]”

2 The actual term “Byzantine” was coined after the Fall of Constantinople in 1453 CE to the Ottoman Turks by the scholar Hieronymus Wolf (1516–1580), to characterize the culture of the Eastern Roman Empire, since “the designation ‘Greek’ was gradually becoming exclusively used to denote Ancient Greek history and culture, and the self-designation of the Byzantines, ‘Roman,’ was obviously out of the question in a Western setting.” Stathakopoulos (2014), 2 and 204.

3 Cameron (2014), 22.

or apparent influence on one another until modern times. At least in the Muslim period, Arab authors were intensely interested in works of Greek science and philosophy, and there was an active translation movement that made accessible to Arabic-speaking intellectuals virtually all the works of Aristotle (384 BCE–322 BCE) and summaries of other philosophers such as Plato.⁴ There was, however, less interest in Greek historians or imaginative writers. And even among the substantial number of Christian minorities who called the Arab lands home and wrote in Arabic there was almost no interest in, or translation from, works composed in Latin.⁵ The few anecdotes preserved, however, demonstrate that Homer's poetry was heard at the caliph's court, and that it was no passing curiosity. Educated people were able to understand it well enough to be able to form aesthetic judgments about its quality.⁶

1.1 *Pre-Islamic Poetry*

On a more general level, it is possible to discern in Arabic pre-Islamic poetry, beginning in the sixth century CE, some of the same concerns with the tragedies and ineluctable contradictions involved in fulfilling the demands of a heroic warrior lifestyle that had preoccupied the protagonists of the pagan Greek classic poems. If for Achilles in the *Iliad* the only way to immortality is through the accomplishment of heroic deeds in battle while alive, because otherwise there is nothing beyond the grave but Lethe (the underworld river of forgetfulness),⁷ there are plenty of pre-Islamic Arab authors who make similar claims. The inescapability of death and how one must accept it are stressed in the great Tammimi elegist Mutammim ibn Nuwayrah ([متمم بن نويرة] 7th c. CE), who, contemplating his own demise, asserts:

<p>ولقد يمر علي يوم أشنع زو المنية أو أرى أتوجع للحادثات فهل تربني أجزع</p>	<p>ولقد غببت بما ألقى حقة أفبعد من ولدت نسيبة أشتكي ولقد علمت ولا محالة أنني</p>
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4 Gutas (1998), 1–8.

5 See Reid (2002), 145 with n. 26: "Latin never took root in the east Mediterranean lands Muslims wrested from Byzantium, and with one exception [Ibn Khaldun's access to a translation of Orosius' Latin chronicle] Latin texts were not translated into Arabic in medieval times."

6 Gutas (1998), 138; and Bustani (1904), i.25–6.

7 Silk (2004), 61 on heroism in the *Iliad*: "The basis of this [heroic] ideology is a logical chain which links death, glory, art and immortality. Death is inescapable and final; therefore life is of irreplaceable value; yet certain acts, especially those that risk or incur death, can achieve the glory that outlives finite life, so long as they are perpetuated in art; [...] at all events, we thus reclaim a kind of immortality from the clutches of mortality itself."

[And oft was I envied for a season for the good luck that was my lot – and
 then again follows thereon a day that is hateful.
 But after those have gone that Nusaibah bore shall I complain of the
 shears of Doom, or be seen lamenting what needs must be?
 And of a truth I know – and there is no averting it – that I am destined to
 be the sport of Fate: but dost thou see me wailing thereat?]
 lines 37–39⁸

Mutammim accepts that death is something he must come to terms with, and may even be alluding (in the metaphor of the “shears of Doom”) to the same imagery of fortuitousness underlying the famous Greek myth of the deities Moirai (Fates), namely the three sisters Clotho (the Spinner), Lachesis (the Measurer) and Atropos (the Unbending), who spin, measure, and arbitrarily cut the span of a human life, as embodied in the image of a slender thread. It was undoubtedly passages like that of Mutammim that caused Sulaymān al-Bustānī ([سليمان البستاني] 1856–1925), the first translator of the entire *Iliad* into Arabic (see below), to compare the stories of the heroes of the Homeric poem to the great poems of the Arabic pre-Islamic tradition, arguing that both were close to the primitive world of nature (*fiṭrah*) and were formed by similar experiences; it was thus not really necessary for the Arabs to translate Homer, because his ideas and motifs were already present in their own poetry.⁹

1.2 *Islamic Culture at its Medieval Height*

The obliquity of the relationship between Greek and Arabic literatures persists as the Islamic dynasties establish themselves and create a new milieu favorable to literary creativity. One can point to passing resemblances in tale collections such as *The Thousand and One* or *Arabian Nights*. For example, in the third voyage of Sinbad, the shipwrecked mariner encounters a giant who keeps him and his companions in a cave (like Polyphemus in Homer’s *Odyssey*) and they only escape by blinding and then tricking their captor. But such stories are too vague and general in their resemblances to possible antecedents – Greek or otherwise – to offer absolute proof of influence in a textual sense, and for most Arab writers Homer (much less Hesiod) remained only insubstantial names.¹⁰ This is true even when circumstances might suggest that we should be expecting more.

8 Lyall (1918), i.93; ii.23.

9 Bustani (1904), i.69 and Hashim (1960), 97–8.

10 Irwin (2004), 71. Cf. Dover (1980), 69, on ancient Greek vases depicting Odysseus and his men blinding Polyphemus (such as the Eleusis Amphora): “The vase-painters have

A perfect example would be the career of the “Poet-Prince” Abū Firās al-Ḥamdānī ([أبو فراس الحمداني] 932–968 CE) whose family, led by his cousin, the famous warrior figure Sayf al-Dawlah ([سيف الدولة], “Sword of the Dynasty”), governed northern Syria throughout the ninth century, with their capital firmly ensconced in the great medieval city of Aleppo near the border with the Byzantine Empire. Though Abu Firas was noble, his mother was a slave originally of Byzantine origin, who had been captured in a raid.¹¹ Though she was unlikely to have come from the Byzantine royal family, as was rumored, she undoubtedly taught her son to speak Greek, something which would have stood him in good stead when he in turn was captured by a Byzantine general and held prisoner at Constantinople for half a decade. There he wrote poems in which melancholy is mingled with boasting, most of them poetic pleas for Sayf al-Dawlah to ransom him.¹² Yet these odes, known as *Al-Rūmiyyāt* [الروميات] or the “Byzantine Poems,” show no trace of Greek influence, drawing instead on the traditions and system of values familiar from pre-Islamic tribal models. In a famous poem addressed to his captor, the emperor Nicephorus II Phocas (912–969; emperor 963–969), Abu Firas boasts defiantly of his desert warrior background:

ألم تفنهم قتلًا وأسرا سيوفنا وأسد الشرى الملاي وان هجرت رعبا ...
 بأقلامنا أجمرت أم بسيوفنا وأسد الشرى قدنا إليك أم كتبنا
 تركناك في وسط الفلاة تجوبها كما اتفق اليربوع يلتئم الترابا
 تفاخرنا بالضرب والطعن في الوغى لقد أوسعتك النفس يا بن استها كذبا ...

[Did not our swords, along with my warriors, the noble lions of Shara,
 annihilate your kin, killing them and taking them prisoner,
 even though, frightened, they took refuge in their dens.
 Because of our quill pens did you cower in your dens, or because of our
 swords?

Did we lead the lions of Shara to you, or books?
 We left you in the midst of the wilderness, wandering,
 just as the jerboa emerges from its den, wrapped in dirt.

illustrated one of the oldest and most wide-spread stories in the world; some know it as one of the adventures of Sinbad the Sailor, but for the Greeks it was an adventure of Odysseus.”

11 DeYoung (2011), 22.

12 See Irwin (2006), 223–4.

You boast you are better than us in striking and thrusting in the tumult
 [of battle]
 your soul has given you too much scope, O son of its buttocks, for lying.]
 lines 13–16¹³

The imagery is replete with depictions of desert life far from the highlands of the Anatolian steppes, but even more to the point Abu Firas does not view his captors as comrades or even relatives (which they may very well have been) but as enemies just one step above animals, dirty as the jerboa that runs through the sand dens of an abandoned encampment. Abu Firas had been taunted by his captors for being from a family of settled, city folk who spent all their time among books. So, in his poem, he asserts his warrior background, boasting of his leadership over his soldiers (metaphorically referenced in the poem as “the lions of Shara”), and addresses his captors solely in the language of insult and vituperation. Not a very promising stage for cultural exchange on either side.

1.3 *Aristotle's Poetics and Arabic Literary Criticism*

A clue to this puzzling disregard for the classics of Greek antiquity in the heyday of Islamic culture may perhaps be retrieved from an examination of the few brief references to Greek literature that appear in medieval Arabic literary criticism. The basic philosophical text of the Greek education system in the later Byzantine empire – Aristotle's *Organon* – was early on translated into Arabic and became, in its turn, a backbone of Arabic philosophical study.¹⁴ Probably even before its translation into Arabic, the *Organon* had come to include the *Poetics* and the *Rhetoric*, and both these works, with their decidedly literary bent, continued to be an integral part of the Arabic *Organon*.¹⁵ This meant that several of the great Muslim philosophers wrote substantial commentaries on Aristotle's *Poetics*: Alfarabius or Avennasar (Abū Naṣr Muḥammad al-Fārābī [أبو نصر محمد الفارابي], c.878–c.950 CE); Avicenna (Ibn Sīnā [ابن سينا], 980–1037 CE); and Averroes (Ibn Rushd [ابن رشد], 1126–1198 CE) all spring to mind. A very influential translation (despite its imperfections) of the *Poetics* had been made from the Syriac by the Baghdadi Christian scholar Abū Bishr Mattā ibn Yūnus ([أبو بشر متا بن يونس]) 870–940 CE in the early tenth century.¹⁶ This was the version most extensively used by Avicenna for his own commentary on

13 Abu Firas al-Hamdani (1987), 34–5. The translation is mine.

14 For recent studies, see Alwishah and Hayes (2015); Tarán and Gutas (2012); Vagelpohl (2008).

15 Dahiyat (1974), 3; Gutas (1998), 147.

16 Dahiyat (1974), 4–5.

Poetics and on which Averroes also relied. In the course of his description of Aristotle's comments on the importance of universals in poetry as opposed to the particulars, Avicenna writes: "In the poetic imaginative representation, there should be no need for these simple myths which are invented stories."¹⁷ The immediate context of Avicenna's remark is to comment on Aristotle's differentiation between poetry and historical narrative, but – as has been persuasively suggested – it contains the nucleus of a condemnation of Greek epic poetry (overwhelmingly full of narratives based on mythological stories) in favor of the lyrical or panegyric [al-madīḥ] genres dominant in Arabic poetry.¹⁸ This criticism of Greek poetry as somehow closer to historical particularism than the universality of the poetic imagination praised in Aristotle is rendered even more pointed in the pronouncements of the Andalusian Ḥāzīm al-Qartājannī ([حازم القرطاجني] 1211–1285 CE) on the same question of universals: "The poets of the Greeks used to create things upon which they built their poetic imaginings and they would make them the focus of their words. They would make those things that did not exist in reality as exempla [al-amthilah] for what was there. They would build on those [exempla] invented tales [qīṣaṣ mukhtārī], like what old women tell young children before they go to bed."¹⁹ To compare Greek poetry to "bedtime stories" does not indicate a high regard for them in the highly stratified Muslim intellectual milieu of the time. While Qartajanni's aesthetic judgments (informed both by the traditional Arabic critical heritage and by Greek philosophical concepts) may have been ahead of their time in some respects,²⁰ in their aloofness from Greek literature they were representative of the views enshrined in Arabic literature well into the nineteenth century.

1.4 *Greek Lyric Poetry in Arabic*

If the disdain for Greek epic poetry evinced by al-Qartajanni and his predecessors is notable, the complete lack of translations of Greek lyric poetry is even more so. Although one might consider Arab intellectuals to recognize a fundamental continuity between the Greek and the Arabic lyric impulses, and to be curious about it, there are no translations, for example, to be found of any of the *Greek Anthology* poems in Arabic before modern times. Perhaps this absence is related to the fact that even for such a ninth-century literary

17 Quoted in Tarán and Gutas (2012), 363. Avicenna comments on Aristotle's *Poetics* 1451b33 (book 9).

18 'Abd al-Hayy (1982), 126.

19 Quoted in 'Abd al-Hayy (1982), 158–9.

20 Allen (1998), 387–8.

figure as al-Jāhiz ([الجاحظ] c.776–868 CE) translation of poetry from one language to another was considered difficult, and any such attempt was frowned upon. Al-Jahiz himself records in his *Book of Animals* (Kitāb al-ḥayawān [كتاب الحيوان]): “The gift of poetry is restricted to the Arabs and to those who speak their language. Poetry cannot, and should not, be translated. When translated, its rhyme is disrupted, its meter ruined, its beauty lost, and its wonder fades.”²¹ It may very well be that the untranslatability of poetry was not the opinion of Jahiz himself and that he was simply recording a statement made by someone else; and that untranslatability was presented as a limitation and a defect of Arabic poetry rather than a virtue, in the context of a general opposition between two categories: “on the one hand, [...] the Arabic language, poetry, untranslatability, orality, newness, Arab origin, and particularity; on the other hand, [...] the Greek language, prose, philosophy, translatability, writing, old age, non-Arab origin, and universality.”²² Certainly, many centuries later the North African educator and historian Ibn Khaldūn ([ابن خلدون] 1332–1406 CE) echoes but also modifies Jahiz’s words when he says: “Indeed poetry is not found exclusively in the Arabic language; rather, it is found in any language, whether Arabic or foreign. There are Arab poets and Greek ones. Aristotle, in his book *The Rhetoric* mentions among them Homer and praises him.”²³ Here Ibn Khaldun does not place any limitations on poetic genius; it belongs to everyone. Yet he does not go so far as to argue that poetry is translatable. What he seems to distinguish is poetic discourse, with all its particular attributes, from other discourses within each language group separately, Greek or Arabic.

This may not be so much a maintenance of Aristotelian categories of art (or perhaps a rejection of them) as it is a recognition of a very important difference between Arabic verse conventions and the Greek and Latin ones. Nearly every pre-modern treatise on Arabic poetics begins with the definition of poetry as “discourse that is metered and rhymed” [al-kalām al-mawzūn al-muqaffā],²⁴ even though philosophers like Avicenna argued that putting something into meter did not make it poetry – that something more was required.²⁵ Like Arabic, Greek and Latin poetry did exhibit metrical, rhythmic structure based on quantity, variations between long and short syllables.²⁶ But neither Greek nor Latin poets employed regular use of rhyme until the rise of Christianity,

21 Quoted in Kilito (2008), 27, 28.

22 Kilito (2008), 36.

23 Quoted in Bustani (1904), i.27. The translation is mine.

24 Allen (1998), 106.

25 Dahiyat (1974), 99–100.

26 Halporn *et al.* (1963); West (1987), 2–3; Wright (1898), 359–68.

when hymns began to employ this technique, albeit irregularly.²⁷ Arabic poetry, on the other hand, from its inception used not only rhyme, but a sort of intensive rhyme, called monorhyme, where every line of the poem ended with the same consonant or consonant-vowel combination. This sound signature instantly identified a poem as a poem, aurally or visually perceived, and thus created a convenient divider between prose and poetry, as is clear from the Arab rhetoricians' definition of poetry mentioned above. Since only Arabic – among the poetries of the Mediterranean region – had this monorhyme convention, it would have made it more than casually difficult to translate poetry from (or into) Arabic from another language. Perhaps this reality is reflected in both Jahiz's and Ibn Khaldun's hesitancy to embrace the idea of translatability as an unproblematic practice. It is interesting to note that it would be precisely in the monorhyme that the twentieth-century poet Khalil Muṭrān ([خليل مطران] 1872–1949) found the greatest obstacle to importing narrative, epic models of Western poetry (including Greek and Latin) into Arabic.²⁸ As we will see, in his prose introduction to his 1924 poem *Nero* – the first extensive treatment of a figure from Roman history in Arabic literature – Mutran would stress the experimental nature of his poem as follows:

To this day there have not been any long poems dealing with one subject in Arabic and that is because the need to observe the monorhyme has been, and still is, an obstacle standing in the way of such attempts. I have therefore wished, by making one final definitive endeavour, to ascertain the extent of the ability of a poet to compose a long poem on a single theme observing a single rhyme throughout. By reaching the furthestmost limit in my experiment I hoped to show to my Arabic-speaking brethren the need to follow different methods in order to keep pace with western nations in the progress which they have achieved in poetry and eloquence.²⁹

2 Modern Times

If the relationship between Arabic and the classical heritage of Graeco-Roman literature had historically been relatively distant,³⁰ the situation changed

²⁷ Lauxtermann (1999), 25.

²⁸ Mutran (1967), iii.48.

²⁹ Quoted in Badawi (1975), 80; see also below, p. 61.

³⁰ Khairallah (1997), 45.

radically in the nineteenth century, and in a very short span of time. The first readily identifiable participant in this re-orientation was the Egyptian scholar and traveler Rifā'ah Rāfī' al-Ṭaḥṭāwī (رفاعة رافع الطهطاوي) [1801–1873]. Tahtawi was sent by the Egyptian ruler, the Khedive, Muḥammad 'Alī (1769–1849), to supervise a group of young Egyptians studying in Paris in 1826. Tahtawi excelled in learning French and actively participated in the lessons of his young charges, who were duly being introduced to the Graeco-Roman classical authors by their tutors at the Sorbonne. Tahtawi was somewhat contemptuous of the whole procedure, since (as he took pains to note) he (as an educated graduate of the traditional Islamic university of al-Azhar) had already been introduced to the great Greek philosophers Aristotle and Plato, whom he knew under their Arabic names, Aristu and Aflatun respectively.³¹ But he returned to Egypt, after several years of study, with a new-found interest in Graeco-Roman history and thought.³² Tahtawi was appointed head of the new Cairo School of Languages (with its leading role in foreign language study and translation in Khedival Egypt) and supervised a number of translations from European languages. He had also planned to translate several classical works of the Graeco-Roman tradition, but these plans were never implemented.³³ He did translate though the pseudo-classical work *Les Aventures de Télémaque* by François Fénelon, and, at the time of his death, he was engaged in writing the historical work *Glorious Light on the Story of Egypt* (Anwār Tawfiq al-jalīl fī akhbār Miṣr [أنوار توفيق الجليل في أخبار مصر], 1868), which was intended to cover the history of Greece and Rome, as well as the Pharaonic history of Egypt.³⁴ Greece was presented there as outshining every ancient civilization – except Egypt. “Greece is the daughter of Egypt,” Tahtawi declared.³⁵

The initiatives of Tahtawi (and those who followed him) resulted in making the history and mythology of Greece and Rome more familiar to an Arab audience, but it was not until the British occupation of Egypt in 1882 and the clear rise of colonial policies intended to facilitate rule over a subject populace that Graeco-Roman canonical works became more firmly fixed in Arab intellectual eyes. This was based, at least partly, on the British desire to advertise their cultural values as superior, so that their new subjects would be less inclined to revolt against their overlords, and consequently a smaller number of imperial

31 Tahtawi (2004), 264 and 341.

32 Reid (2002), 146.

33 Shayyal (1962), 33–5.

34 Brugman (1984), 23 and Reid (2002), 108–12, 145–8.

35 Quoted in Reid (2002), 146.

troops would be required to keep them in check.³⁶ The new British rulers of Egypt were quite accustomed to use Greek and Latin references in their public business as a means of undergirding their assertions of dominance.³⁷ Egyptians (and later Arabs from other countries) were thus eager to counter such initiatives by laying claim to a cultural heritage whose physical reminders were clearly visible around them. The very visibility of the Greek and Roman monuments (ruined though they might be) could be seen as giving form and shape to their claims of equality with the colonial masters who asserted their own debt to these classical models. It should be no wonder, then, that the Arabs became more curious about what the architects of those panoramas so easily accessible around them had thought.

3 Sulayman al-Bustani: The *Iliad* into Arabic

It is in this atmosphere that the translation of the *Iliad* by the Lebanese writer and statesman Sulayman al-Bustani emerged. Sulayman was born into a Christian family in Bkashin, a small town outside of Beirut, but he went to live in that metropolis as a student in the school of his illustrious uncle Butrus al-Bustani ([بطرس البستاني] 1819–1883), one of the early intellectual leaders of a movement called the *Nahḍah* (“rising up”), usually likened in its profound cultural impact to the fifteenth-century Renaissance in Europe. Like the European intellectuals of the Renaissance, the Arabs of the *Nahḍah* were interested in the intellectual achievements of the past, but they generally preferred the landmarks of the Arab Islamic past to those of Graeco-Roman and European civilization.

Sulayman al-Bustani proved the exception to this rule. He may have been inspired in this by the early interest that his uncle expressed in the idea of translating Graeco-Roman classics into Arabic.³⁸ Even more pertinent, since his days at his uncle’s school (where he excelled) Sulayman had been fascinated by narrative poetry and especially, he tells us, Milton’s *Paradise Lost*.³⁹ By the time he grew up, however, and was invited to Baghdad, in 1876, by Qasim al-Zubayr Pasha to found a secular, nationalist school along the lines of his uncle’s National School [al-madrasah al-wataniyah],⁴⁰ Sulayman’s admiration

36 See Bhabha (1994), 40–5, on Frantz Fanon’s treatment of the problem of colonial cultural alienation.

37 Reid (2002), 153–8.

38 Hourani (1991), 177.

39 Bustani (1904), i.68.

40 Hashim (1960), 15.

had settled on the *Iliad*, believing that “even though it was the most ancient chronologically” of the classical Graeco-Roman texts, it was “the most modern of them in its splendor, the most astounding of them in its freshness, the most full of light among them, the one with the greatest clarity and the most eloquent of them all. The elite of poets have woven on its loom but never reached its peak. They drank from its sea and were never able to exhaust it.”⁴¹

Such forthright praise for Homer’s masterpiece clearly transcends the limitations of a mere tactical interest in opposing the practices of colonialist discourse. It represents a whole new level of artistic appreciation of Greek poetry in Arabic and ushers in what would become very much akin to the Hellenism of Western Romanticism: the admiration for what is “primitive” and (therefore) spontaneous, and what emerges from emotion rather than imitation.⁴² In this conception, Greek poetry then becomes the locus for a belief that it is “the source, the uncontaminated original.”⁴³ A similar belief becomes the core principle that informs Bustani’s translation, and gives a grounding for initiatives among modern Arab writers, especially poets, in succeeding decades.

Amid his many other enterprises during his twenties, including several visits to the tribes of the Arabian Peninsula between 1876 and 1885,⁴⁴ Sulayman al-Bustani worked intermittently on the *Iliad*, turning more seriously to it after 1886, while living in Beirut, Istanbul, and Chicago (where he represented the Ottoman government at the 1893 Chicago Columbian Exposition). After his return to Lebanon and then Cairo at the turn of the twentieth century, the Arabic *Iliad* was finally published to much fanfare in 1904. A commemorative dinner was given in Bustani’s honor in June at Shephard’s Hotel in downtown Cairo and attended by many cultural notables of the city.⁴⁵ The translation’s reception was enthusiastic at the time, but subsequently it has been seen as more of a curiosity than an accomplished work in its own right.⁴⁶ Bustani’s dexterity in using different strategies to overcome the problem of monotony in attempting to use Arabic monorhymed verse to render a lengthy epic poem from another language has been justly celebrated.⁴⁷ At the same time, his manifest inability to free himself from the formulas found in medieval Arabic poetry (relating most frequently to paronomasia and other linguistic

41 Bustani (1904), i.69. The translation is mine.

42 See Abrams (1953), 78–84, on “primitive language” and “primitive poetry” in relation to Romantic theory.

43 Wilson (1989), 39.

44 Hashim (1960), 15–16.

45 Hourani (1991), 181.

46 Khouri (1971), 156–7.

47 Jayyusi (1977), i.66; Fanus (1986), 109–10.

ornaments that give the lines a “sing-song” quality), his mishandling of the use of epithets, his incredible shrinkage or expansion (through unnecessary repetitions) of lines have all been duly noted.⁴⁸ What must surely have been strange to even an Arabic-speaking audience were the lengthy, erudite footnotes found on virtually every page. Their sheer volume encrusted even Hector’s farewell to his wife Andromache in Book Six, which Bustani himself recognized as one of the emotional highpoints of the poem.⁴⁹ Nothing contributed more to the limping, static quality of the translation than the voluminous footnotes.

4 Khalil Mutran and the Graeco-Roman Classical Heritage

The sheer volume of the innovative work of the Lebanese-Egyptian poet Khalil Mutran (1872–1949) might obscure his major contribution to the Arab perception of the Graeco-Roman world in the twentieth century.⁵⁰ In 1904, Mutran (by then a well-established figure in the Egyptian capital as a poet and a journalist) was among the honored guests at the celebration for the publication of the *Iliad*’s translation by his compatriot Bustani in Cairo.⁵¹ But the use of examples from Graeco-Roman literature was nothing new to him. In 1899, he had already composed “Baalbek Castle” (Qal‘at Ba‘alabakk [قلعة بعلبك], 1899), a poem about the impressive Roman ruins at Ba‘albek (his birthplace) in Lebanon, which had recently been excavated and restored under the patronage of Kaiser Wilhelm II.⁵² Wilhelm himself had visited the city the year before, at the end of a long official journey from Jerusalem to Damascus and then to Beirut. The journey was heavily saturated by the symbolism of imperial power, as Wilhelm sought to assert a more visible German presence in the Middle East. As has aptly be noted, the various staged appearances of the monarch “betray an intense interest in authenticity, intended as a means to integrate the beholder into the presented scene, to carry him away into a remote, imagined past.”⁵³

Mutran begins his poem with a similar reimagining of the past as lingering into the present, and uses images of the ruins as a vehicle through which the self (past and present) of the poet is mediated:

48 Hamori (1978), 96–100.

49 Bustani (1904), i.164.

50 Allen (1998), 208.

51 Hourani (1991), 182.

52 Tanahi (1965), 21 and Scheffler (1998), 25.

53 Neuwirth (1998), xiii.

...	فإذا مر فهي في الآثار	هم فجر الحياة بالإدبار
....	ووالصبي كالكرى نعيم ولكن	والصبي كالكرى نعيم ولكن
	فإذا بان عاش بالتذكار	ينغم المرء عيشه في صباه

[The dawn of life begins with neglect [of the past]
but if it continues, then it will become ruined traces,
Youth may be like slumber, sweet, but
it will come to an end, leaving a young man in the prime of life unknowing.
A man will plunder everything that comes his way in his adolescence in
order to eke out a livelihood
but if he lives long enough to obtain property for himself, he will live by
mementos.]

lines 1-3⁵⁴

These lines are notable for their self-referentiality. Clearly, for Mutran, the encounter with the otherness of the past (and, even more poignantly, with his own past) makes the present and the self meaningful through the memories called up by the sight of the ruined buildings.

Then Mutran makes an abrupt shift in the direction of his meditation. If the broken columns and crumbling walkways had inaugurated the poet's reverie, now his eyes are caught and held by flowers and vegetation cascading among the carvings:

.....	لم تفتتها نضارة الأزهار	وضروبا من كل زهر أنيق
.....	ياهرات لكنها من حجار	وشموسا مضينة وشعاعا
.....	خالدات الغدو والإبتكار	وطيور ذواهبأ آيات
.....	يصنوف النجوم والأنوار	في جنان معلقات زواه

[And every variety of elegant flower
No kind of blossoming flower has been overlooked
With sun shining and light rays
dazzling, though made of stone,
and birds coming and going,
ever moving and embarking with the sun,

54 Mutran (1967), i.97. The translation of the poem is mine.

in a garden hung with the brilliance
of rank upon rank of bushes and blossoms.]

lines 34–7⁵⁵

The ruins are brought to life by the vegetation twining round them and the birds fluttering above them in the sunlight – the emphasis on the sun also evoking the Greek name of the city, Heliopolis, meaning “City of the Sun.” Nature fuses with human craft in a seamlessly dazzling display.

But, whom did the poet credit with originally placing and constructing the temple?⁵⁶ Interestingly, they were not the Romans:

أهل “فينيقيا” سلام عليكم يوم تفنى بقية الادهار ...
لكم الارض خالدين عليها يعظيم الأعمال والآثار ...
[...]
شيدوها للشمس دار صلاة وأتم “الرومان” حلي الدار ...

[People of Phoenicia, greetings!

On a day when the remnants of time disappear
you have the earth forever in your grasp
because of your deeds and monuments

[...]

They built them as a house of prayer for the sun
and the Romans finished the decoration of the house.]

lines 45–6, 52⁵⁷

Mutran’s identification of the Phoenicians as the builders may seem odd, but it turns out that the French philosopher, linguist, and historian Ernest Renan (1823–1892), in a visit to Baalbek in the early 1860s with the support of the French government, had proposed the connection of the Phoenicians to the site. The Francophone Mutran might have easily been introduced to this idea during his stay in France in the early 1890s.⁵⁸

55 Mutran (1967), i.99.

56 For the complex of temples at Baalbek and the Romanized Triad of Heliopolis (Jupiter, Venus and Mercury), an essentially Phoenician cult, see the relevant UNESCO webpage: <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/294/>.

57 Mutran (1967), i.100–1.

58 Makdissi (1998), 149 and Khouri (1971), 141.

But in the colonial context of the time there must have been a political overtone too in Mutran's evocation of the Phoenician past of Baalbek's Roman ruins, which related more to the British occupation of Egypt (Mutran's new place of residence) than to the Ottoman territories of Syria where Baalbek was located. In the poem the Romans (the empire so admired by the British civil servants in Egypt) are given some credit for the construction of the temple, since they "finished the decoration of the house," but undeniably this is a minor role. Twenty years before the publication of the poem, Egyptian writers had begun to appropriate the Pyramids and other Pharaonic ruins into their works as evidence of the skill and power of their ancestors. Among these authors was the famous poet Maḥmūd Sāmī al-Bārūdī ([محمود سامي البارودي] 1839–1904), Mutran's mentor and co-founder of the Charitable Welfare Society [jam'iyat al-maqāṣid al-khayriyah], which aimed (among other things) at the promotion and dissemination of information about Pharaonic antiquities.⁵⁹ Al-Barudi wrote several poems describing and praising ancient Egyptian sites for the Society. It would not be far-fetched to suggest that Mutran was following a similar strategy here. Arguably, a similar impulse had animated Tahtawi, Barudi, and Bustani to concentrate on moulding a strong identity of the self, with ample grounding in past strengths and achievements, as a counterbalance to British assertions of Arab inadequacy or incapacity.

Mutran's next major foray into the Roman past seems to confirm that there was political dimension to his appropriation of classical material. This was his lengthy (327 verses) narrative poem *Nero* (Nayrun [نبرون], 1924), recounting the downfall and death of the Roman emperor, to which I referred at the beginning of this chapter. Mutran composed the poem in the traditional monorhyme and delivered it to a packed audience in the main auditorium of the American University of Beirut on his first trip back to Lebanon after the end of the First World War. A transcript of the introductory speech Mutran delivered before reciting the poem survives.⁶⁰ In it, one can see how Mutran had been preoccupied not only with the difficulties of composing a long, narrative poem (in monorhyme) on the model of Greek epic poetry,⁶¹ but equally enough with the story of the emperor Nero whose growing oppression of his Roman subjects bore parallels, in Mutran's mind, with the British occupation of Egypt.⁶² In the end, responsibility for both tyrannies must be laid on the subjects who did nothing to oppose them:

59 DeYoung (2015), 236 and 355.

60 Mutran (1967), iii.48.

61 See above, p. 54.

62 Khouri (1971), 166–8.

.... أمة لو كهرته ارتد كهرًا من يلم "نيرون" اني لائم
 "قيصر" قيل له أم قيل "كسرى" كل قوم خالقوا "نيرونهم"

[Though some denounce Nero, I denounce the nation;
 had it defied him, retreat would have been his lot.
 Every nation creates its own Nero,
 be he called "Caesar" or "Chosroes"]

lines 324–7⁶³

Oppression transcends temporality, and agency is the only solution for it.

5 Following Mutran: The Diwan School

The first volume of Mutran's collected poems (Dīwān [ديوان]) was published in 1908, and, like Bustani's translation of the *Iliad*, was treated as a milestone in the development of Arabic literature.⁶⁴ It was this publication, for example, that made Mutran's poem "Baalbek Castle," with its equation between Graeco-Roman monuments and Phoenician culture, available to a wider audience. But the re-valuation of Arab authors' relation to their past, to their own ancient Mediterranean heritage (broader in its roots than just that of Graeco-Roman classicism) had already begun to pick up pace. In the ensuing decade a group of young journalist-poets in Egypt would go on to follow untrodden paths in their engagement with Western literature and its classical predecessors: 'Abbās Maḥmūd al-'Aqqād ([عباس محمود العقاد] 1889–1964), Ibrāhīm al-Māzinī ([إبراهيم المازني] c.1889–1949), and 'Abd al-Raḥmān Shukrī ([عبد الرحمن شكري] 1886–1958).

Both Mazini and Shukri were educated at the Teachers' Training College in Cairo, where they were exposed to Western (largely English Romantic) poets who used classical models for their work. 'Aqqad was self-educated in Western literature (though he knew enough English to be able to read the language), but he read voraciously while working as a literary journalist. In 1921, the three founded the first organized literary movement designed to articulate the principles of modern Arabic literature informed by the reading of Western classicism: the Dīwān Group.⁶⁵ Their education and engagement with European literature were much more oriented to the understanding of the latest

63 Khouri and Algar (1974), 43, with Khouri (1971), 167–8.

64 Jumayyil (1908), 531.

65 'Abd al-Hayy (1982), 127–40.

innovations in Western thought than their predecessors. This resulted in a more theoretical engagement with the relationship between mythology and poetry, where myth becomes an essential reservoir for the development of the creative imagination, and the “transformation of the divine into human psychic reality.”⁶⁶ Shukri, in particular, was able to translate this theoretical inspiration into poetic practice, and wrote the first truly mythological poems in Arabic during the years he spent at Sheffield University (1909–1912), on an Egyptian government fellowship.⁶⁷ At this time he was introduced to the Bohn’s Classical Library, a standard set of anthologies of Greek and Latin works in English translation, inaugurated by the publisher Henry George Bohn (1796–1884) and widely used at British universities. Shukri published these mythological poems in his second collection *Pearls of Thought* (La’ālī’ al-afkār [لآلئ الأفكار], 1913), including perhaps his most notable lyric from this period, “Narcissus” (Narjīs [نرجيس]).⁶⁸ In all the poems the individual self is explored through a romantically-tinged mythology, not least through techniques of personification, sensual description, and interest in the emotions, especially those related to the fantastic and the sublime. It is worth noting that ‘Aqqad, for example, is recorded as reading Edmund Burke’s *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757) in 1905 or 1906 and it is more than likely that he passed his observations on the text to his friends, such as Shukri.⁶⁹ This exciting new interest in how Greek and Latin models can cross-fertilize Arabic literary works had perhaps best exemplified by the publication in 1917 of a poem entitled “A Personal Opinion” (Ra’y [الرأي]) by Zakariyā Ibrāhīm (c.1900–c.1967), where for the very first time a Latin work, Ovid’s *Ars Amatoria*, was the inspiration.⁷⁰

6 Arabic Literature in America and Classical Reception: The Example of Kahlil Gibran

Even before the Diwan Group commences its exploration of the Graeco-Roman classical tradition in Egypt, significant initiatives in this regard can be observed among the Arabic language poets in the Americas, especially their leader, Kahlil Gibran (Khalil Jubrān [خليل جبران], 1883–1931). Gibran

66 ‘Abd al-Hayy (1982), 127.

67 DeYoung (2010), 331.

68 ‘Abd al-Hayy (1982), 143.

69 ‘Abd al-Hayy (1982), 133.

70 Quoted in ‘Abd al-Hayy (1982), 143.

had emigrated with his family to Boston in 1895, where he began his education in the local public schools.⁷¹ At the age of fifteen he returned temporarily to his native Lebanon to finish his education and formally learn Arabic. On the outward voyage he carried with him *The Age of Fable* by the Bostonian Thomas Bulfinch (1796–1867), which he read “with the greatest enthusiasm.”⁷² *The Age of Fable* had played a key role in introducing generations of young people to classical mythology in an easily accessible form. Chapter 8 of that book recorded the myth of Venus and Adonis, but without giving information about the myth’s Phoenician and Sumerian origins, which are now known as the myth of Ishtar (Astarte) and Tammuz. However, these earlier myths and their similarities to the story of Venus and Adonis were becoming well known in European and American intellectual circles, inspiring artists and writers to work on these themes. Gibran saw himself as a rising artist (several of his drawings had been published in Boston in 1898, shortly after he left for Lebanon) and he must have known the oil painting *Astarte Syriaca* (1877) and the accompanying sonnet by the pre-Raphaelite Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828–1882), as well as John Singer Sargent’s mural of *Astarte*, produced in the mid-1890s and hung in the Boston Public Library as part of Sargent’s installation *The Triumph of Religion*.

At any rate, in his early novel *Broken Wings* (Ajniḥah Mutakassirah [الأجنحة المتكسرة], 1912), Gibran included an ekphrastic description of two wall paintings in a small temple outside of Beirut, where the protagonist had regular secret meetings with his beloved Salmā: “At the time of my story very few people interested in relics and ancient ruins had visited it. [...] Due to its seclusion, it had become a haven for worshippers and a shrine for lonely lovers.” One of the wall paintings was an old Phoenician picture “depicting Ishtar, goddess of love and beauty, sitting on a throne, surrounded by seven nude virgins [...] The first one carries a torch; the second, a guitar; the third, a censer; the fourth a jug of wine; the fifth, a branch of roses; the sixth, a wreath of laurel; the seventh, a bow and arrow; and all of them look at Ishtar reverently.” On the other picture was a Byzantine icon of “Christ nailed to the cross, and at His side stand His sorrowful mother and Mary Magdalene and two other women weeping.”⁷³ In conversations they had, Salma said to the protagonist:

71 The photographer Fred Holland Day (see cover illustration, this volume) took some famous pictures of Gibran in Boston [P. T.].

72 ‘Abd al-Hayy (1982), 146.

73 Gibran (1962), 101–2.

The poets and writers are trying to understand the reality of woman, but up to this day they have not understood the hidden secrets of her heart [...] In the heart of this rock there are two symbols depicting the essence of a woman's desires and revealing the hidden secrets of her soul, moving between love and sorrow – between affection and sacrifice, between Ishtar sitting on the throne and Mary standing by the cross. The man buys glory and reputation, but the woman pays the price.⁷⁴

Gibran used ancient exemplars to comment upon current issues just as Mutran – and to a lesser extent, Bustani – had done, but he extended his themes to include ancient and modern sexuality. All this is very much in keeping with the tropological use of ruins in literature to compare and contrast manifestations of ancient and modern culture.⁷⁵

Students of Gibran's work have been quite correct to note that his use of ancient tropes does not pertain particularly to the Graeco-Roman tradition, nor is it something found in his early poems, but rather in his novels and artistic prose poetry.⁷⁶ But generic considerations should perhaps not be as important as the undeniable influence that Gibran had on later writers, poets as well as prose authors. Nor should it detract from examining an important distinction that appears in his later writing: that between Apollonian (normative, orderly) and Dionysian (destructive, decadent) art. From the 1890s, Gibran had grown increasingly interested in the works of Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900), which were very much current in the Boston intellectual circles of his youth, and in his works one can discern specific echoes of Nietzsche's later works, such as *The Gay Science* [Die fröhliche Wissenschaft] and *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* [Also sprach Zarathustra].⁷⁷ It is less easy, however, to discern whether he actually read Nietzsche's early essay *The Birth of Tragedy* [Die Geburt der Tragödie] (1871), where the latter first laid out his understanding of the distinction between the Apollonian and the Dionysian.⁷⁸ Nevertheless, it is a concept that has a certain value for understanding how Gibran approached the classics. In his *ekphrasis* from *Broken Wings*, for example, the emphasis on the painting of Ishtar and her worshippers is in keeping with Nietzsche's concept of the Dionysian element in Greek literature which stresses the origins of the lyric poetry.

74 Gibran (1962), 104–5.

75 Gross (1992), 97–8.

76 'Abd al-Hayy (1982), 146.

77 Hawi (1972), 98 and 207–10.

78 In fact, Nietzsche himself was less than complacent about the meaningfulness of the distinction in his later writings; Nietzsche (1967), 19–22.

This tendency of Gibran to emphasize sometimes ancient Phoenician (as opposed to Greek or Latin) and sometimes Christian exemplars (or ones drawn from another tradition) is noticeable throughout his career. As early as in 1909, while he was studying art in Paris, he met the sculptor Auguste Rodin (who grappled himself with the legacy of Graeco-Roman art), who introduced him to the art and poetry of William Blake.⁷⁹ This was a revelation for Gibran: “no one can understand Blake through intellect. His world can only be seen by the eye of the eye – never by the eye itself.”⁸⁰ Blake would henceforth be the single most notable influence on the mature Gibran’s art. Later, in 1913, Gibran would note in a letter to one of his admirers that, admirable as Greek and Latin art was, it was limited by being “visual,” while the art of other ancient peoples was “visionary.”⁸¹

This eclectic openness to a variety of traditions pioneered by Gibran and other Mahjar writers (the name given to Arab emigrant writers in the Americas) would be taken up later by Arab Modernist poets and become a hallmark of contemporary Arab poetic discourse on the interaction between modernity and tradition.⁸² In this discourse, Graeco-Roman exemplars became one among many other variations that offered themselves up for exploration of the dialogue between present and past. Ancient Sumerian myths, Jewish, Christian and Muslim symbols, Arab folklore, Indian myth, Sufi mystical tales, heroic figures from Islamic and European history all play their singular roles alongside Greek and Roman gods in a drama of death and rebirth that appears in poem after poem.⁸³ The most famous Modernist poet of the latter half of the twentieth century, the Syrian-Lebanese ‘Alī Aḥmad Sa‘īd ([علي أحمد سعيد], b. 1930), even adopted as his literary pseudonym the name Adūnīs (Adonis), borrowing the title of the lover of Astarte, who was killed during a hunt and later reborn as an anemone flower.⁸⁴ Eventually, as we will see, much of this lore would be transmitted through the translation into Arabic of James Frazer’s *The Golden Bough* in the early 1950s. But back in the early twentieth century the voices most receptive to the use of mythological themes in their poetry were that of Gibran, and, to a lesser extent, of other Arab American authors such as Amīn al-Riḥānī ([أمين الريحاني] 1876–1940), Mikhā’il Nu‘aymah ([ميخائيل نعيمة] or [ميخائيل] 1876–1940), and others.

79 Bushrui and Jenkins (1998), 4, 88–9.

80 Letter by Gibran, Oct. 1915; quoted in Bushrui and Jenkins (1998), 4, 89.

81 ‘Abd al-Hayy (1982), 146.

82 Musawi (2006), 14–16.

83 Jayyusi (1977), ii.739–40; Khairallah (1997), 47.

84 Adonis (2008), 12.

نعيمة] 1889–1998), Īlīyā Abū Mādī ([إيليا أبو ماضي] 1890–1957), and Shafīq Ma'lūf ([شفيق معلوف] 1905–76), to name only a few.⁸⁵

As we saw in relation to his *Broken Wings*, Gibran often celebrated the Dionysian concept in his work. Nietzsche had paid considerable attention to this dimension of Greek literature, talking about the combination of terror and ecstasy “that wells up from the innermost depths of man” as the core of the Dionysian, which “is brought home to us most intimately by the analogy of intoxication.”⁸⁶ In his early essay “A Poet’s Death is his Life” (Mawt al-shā’ir ḥayātuh [موت الشاعر حياته]) Gibran evoked a similar picture of the poet as an ecstatic visionary whose mission is to transform, or even destroy, the intimations of static perfection and order that are the basis of Apollonian art. The poet invokes Death, asking him to come close to him and release him from the chains of the material world: “deliver me from those human beings who believe me a stranger to them because I would translate what I hear from the angels to the language of humankind.”⁸⁷ The dying poet then goes on to have a vision of how the inhabitants of the future would see him quite differently:

The generations will have passed and the inhabitant of this city, sunk in the torpor of denial and neglect, will arise and see with their eyes the dawn of knowledge, will erect a great statue of the poet in the middle of the public square and hold a festival for him every year ... Oh, how ignorant is man!⁸⁸

Even though the allusion is indirect, the atmosphere seems permeated with images that recall the Dionysian rites of ancient Greece rather than “Apollo, [who] as ethical deity, exacts measure of his disciples.”⁸⁹ Yet Apollo as the god of prophecy would also leave a lesser, though discernible, imprint on Gibran’s *The Prophet* (1923), together with another mythical figure, that of Orpheus (see below). In a letter from America Gibran expressed his longing for his homeland, also mentioning Apollo:

Remember me when you see the sun rising behind Mount Sunnin or Fam El Mizab. Think of me when you see the sun coming down toward its setting, spreading its red garment upon the mountains and the valleys as

85 Khouri (1987), 53–6.

86 Nietzsche (1967), 36.

87 Gibran (1961), 252. The translation is mine.

88 Gibran (1961), 253. The translation is mine.

89 Nietzsche (1967), 46.

if shedding blood instead of tears as it bids Lebanon farewell. Recall my name when you see the shepherds sitting in the shadow of the trees and blowing their reeds and filling the silent field with soothing music as did Apollo when he was exiled to this world.⁹⁰

Yet even at this point, Apollo has already become a figure divorced from the idea of cultural mediation associated with him in classical Greek thought and is already approaching the level of alienation and loneliness found in Gibran's Almustafa, the protagonist of *The Prophet* and inhabitant of Orphalese.

7 The Apollo Group

In the late 1920s and early 1930s there was one fraternity of poets who were drawn more to the Apollonian model of ancient Greece than the Dionysian. This was the aptly named Apollo Group of Egypt.⁹¹ Their guiding visionary was the poet Aḥmad Zākī Abū Shādī ([حمد زكي أبو شادي] 1892–1955), who had trained as a doctor in England before returning to Egypt in 1922.⁹² Abu Shadi's family was well-connected (his father was a lawyer with literary interests), and during his childhood prominent literary figures, including Khalil Mutran, often visited their home.⁹³ In 1910, while still in his teens, Abu Shadi became the first modern Egyptian poet to visit Greece, and ten years later published an article, "Greek Beauty" (Al-Jamāl al-Ighriqī [الجمال الإغريقي]), inspired by that visit.⁹⁴ It must be acknowledged however that Abu Shadi was inspired by European Romanticism in general (including Romantic Hellenism) more than by any particular aspect of Hellenism as such. This was reflected in both his poetry of the 1920s and his leadership of the Apollo Society which was founded in 1932 in Cairo.⁹⁵ Abu Shadi can best be evaluated as one of the twentieth-century Arab poets whose poetic energy was frequently dissipated in his desire to innovate and be considered the initiator of a particular poetic trend rather than to pursue a set of well-articulated principles to their culmination. Yet this was a period in which Greek and Latin study had several influential champions at

90 Quoted in Bushrui and Jenkins (1998), 36.

91 Starkey (2006), 68–9.

92 Brugman (1984), 158–61.

93 Brugman (1984), 159–61. Mutran would also serve as president of the Apollo Society after the death of its first president, the neo-classical poet Ahmad Shawqi (1868–1932).

94 'Abd al-Hayy (1982), 149.

95 Jayyusi (1977), ii.382–3 and 387.

Egypt's universities,⁹⁶ and it must have seemed a logical move on Abu Shadi's part to launch a new journal named for the Greek god Apollo. This general context also helps explain the magazine's initial popularity.

In the opening editorial of the *Apollo Magazine* (Majallat Abūlū [مجلة أبولو]) – which, as a general practice, included representations of scenes from Greek and ancient Egyptian mythology, together with reproductions of works of European art⁹⁷ – Abu Shadi concluded with a rousing statement that appears promising:

This is our [the Arabs'] age for poetry and poets. Just as Greek mythology used to sing with the divinity of Apollo, the lord of the sun, poetry, music and prophecy, we now sing in the sanctuary of those memories that are fully aware of what elevates the beauty of Arabic poetry and the souls of its poets.⁹⁸

On closer examination, however, Abu Shadi's vision is rather vague. He endorses Apollo, to be sure, and speaks of the importance of the poets' emotional inner life and their commitment to beauty as a source of inspiration. However, his own poetic contribution to this inaugural issue of the journal was entitled "A Death and a Life" (Mawt wa-ḥayāh [موت وحياة]) and spoke of how the sorrow caused by the contemplation of impending death may be relieved by the power of love and the "spirit of beauty,"⁹⁹ without referring to any god, goddess, or temple. The meditation was oriented to abstract generalizations. The same applies to the other poems in the first volume of the *Apollo Magazine*. A number of the best poems, such as, for example, Ibrāhīm Nājī's ([إبراهيم ناجي] 1898–1953) influential masterpiece, "The Return" (Al-'Awdah [العودة]), are revaluations of the conventional topoi of pre-Islamic Arabic poetry, adapted to modern urban life, or generalized invocations of nature. Apart from the editorial of Abu Shadi, any other direct or indirect reference to Apollo or the inspirational power of the Greek mythological world appeared in the congratulations and felicitations sent by prominent literary figures, and, above all, in one essay authored by one of Abu Shadi's academic disciples, the German-educated professor from Dār al-'Ulūm, 'Alī al-'Anānī ([علي العناني] d. 1940).

The essay, entitled "Apollo and Living Poetry," was the first of a trio of lively and informative essays by Anani that appeared in sequence in the first three

96 Reid (2015), 241–5.

97 Meisami and Starkey (1998), 96 (R. C. Ostle).

98 Abu Shadi (1932a), 5.

99 Abu Shadi (1932b), 9.

issues of the journal. The essays aimed at both informing the audience about the Greek conception of Apollo and inspiring them to adopt this deity as their artistic patron. In the first essay Anani calls out to the poets he wishes to encourage:

As for you, O poet of natural talent, you should seek inspiration from the apparitions and images of poetry through the revelation of a god skillful and full of artistry who inspires all kinds of crafts and arts, from Apollo scion of the gods (the people of the first order), possessor of the highest place among the gods of Olympus. The one who is happy in his art and in his inspiration when [Apollo] inspires and gives revelations, he is the one who inspires life and happiness, and reveals the hidden things of the universe and the secrets of existence. He acquires from [Apollo the essence of] those secrets, solves all puzzles, and guides [others] to truth and the power of life in the imagery of the imagination. You, O poet of natural talent, speak only living poetry that expresses the revelations of Apollo about the meaning of life in general existence in its entirety. You are a living poet and you are a naturally talented poet. You, even though you may have been in despair, you are [now] happy in your life and with your point of view on life. You are all hope and anticipation. Despair will not gain access to you from any direction, since despair has nothing to do with life.¹⁰⁰

Although the exact nature of the terms is sometimes obscured in the enthusiastic use of apostrophe, this passage reveals some telling affinities to Nietzsche's concept of Apollonian art. Besides the obvious invocation of Apollo, there is an appeal to envisioning the world as an ordered thing, even though that order may not be immediately apprehensible. Apollo, as the god of arrangement, proportion, and harmony, is uniquely positioned to reveal the structure of that order to those who submit themselves to his discipline. And this order is best found in the masterpieces of canonical literature, not in hitherto obscure and forgotten works. The poets who can embody these principles are the ones who are "happy in [their] art." They have no point of connection with Dionysian artists who, according to the essay, are prone to despair. Though individual poets of the Apollo Group may on occasion express despair, the model they are being exhorted to follow by Abu Shadi and Anani is quite different.

100 'Anani (1932), 30–1. The translation is mine.

8 Graeco-Roman Classical Influences in Arabic Poetry after the Second World War: Death and Rebirth Myths

While there is a relative lull in the interest in myth or ancient civilizations in the interwar years, interest redoubles after the conclusion of the Second World War, particularly from intellectuals in the Levant and the Fertile Crescent, where Phoenicianism was a recognizable influence. In those places, focus lies on gods of death and rebirth, especially the Phoenician and Sumerian myth of Ishtar and Tammuz that eventually gave rise to the Graeco-Roman myth of Venus and Adonis. As we saw, the currency of these mythic stories was enhanced by the translation of substantial portions of James G. Frazer's *The Golden Bough*, and more precisely from the Fourth Part, *Adonis, Attis and Osiris: Studies in the History of Oriental Religion*, into Arabic in the mid-1950s by Jabrā Ibrāhīm Jabrā ([جبرا إبراهيم جبرا] 1920–1994), the well-known Palestinian poet and novelist, while in exile in Iraq. The translation made a greater range of these mythic narratives immediately available.¹⁰¹ As Jabra himself noted, the acceptability of these stories was enhanced by the fact that many of them originated in local areas of the Arab world.¹⁰² They were not innately foreign or strange but had the ring of popular familiarity. Quite clearly this non-canoncity and popular origin made them attractive to those modern poets who had been influenced by Gibran and other Arab writers like him who were oriented toward the Dionysian element of Greek literature as interpreted by Nietzsche. It is difficult to determine exactly when the poets of the Arab Modernist school began to use the mythical figures from death and rebirth myths in their poems. In a sense, they could have relied on models from their predecessors Mutran, Rihani, and Gibran. But even before the publication of the translation of Frazer's *The Golden Bough*, the minor Lebanese poet and doctor Ḥabīb Thābit ([حبيب ثابت] 1890–1953) published *Astarte and Adonis* ('Ashtarūt wa-Adūnīs [عشتروت وادونيس]), in 1948, "a verse epic" consisting of a sequence of sixteen poems, encapsulating the story of the goddess of love and her doomed lover. The book was lavishly illustrated, with footnotes probably taken from Frazer,¹⁰³ that thoroughly explain the setting of the poem in the shrine of the town Afka (ancient Aphaca) in the mountains northeast of Beirut: the Abraham River (ancient Adonis River) has its source just outside the town; in the spring, rains bring down the clay of the hillsides and they turn the river red; Adonis is said to have been born and died there. Anyone who

101 Frazer (1957); see Allen (1998), 214.

102 Quoted in Jayyusi (1977), ii.731.

103 'Abd al-Hayy (1982), 153.

read the poem, with its accompanying notes and illustrations, would gain a first-rate knowledge of the lineaments of the myth.

Jabra, of course, was an early proponent of these death and rebirth myths in his poetry. In the early 1950s, he became friends with the young Iraqi poet Badr Shākir al-Sayyāb ([بدر شاكر السياب] 1926–1964), who also found the myths suggestive.¹⁰⁴ Jabra became expertly familiar with them and frequently exploited them in his lyrics.¹⁰⁵ From Jabra they probably passed to ‘Abd al-Wahhāb al-Bayātī ([عبد الوهاب اليباتي] 1926–1999), another prominent Iraqi poet, who was a schoolmate of Sayyab at the Baghdad Teacher’s College. Sayyab, Jabra, and Bayati all visited Beirut, where they met with Adunis and Yūsuf al-Khāl ([يوسف الخال] 1917–1987), both editors of the avant-garde review *Poetry* (Shi‘r [الشعر]).¹⁰⁶ Adunis, in particular, had already begun to use variations of the death and rebirth theme in his own poems.¹⁰⁷ He, like most of his fellow Modernists, would never entirely abandon the practice of evoking this particular myth. In the wake of military setbacks (like the 1967 Arab-Israeli War) and political disintegration, however, for more recent generations of Arab poets the trope has seemed naively optimistic.¹⁰⁸

9 Odysseus and Sinbad

In its earliest manifestations in modern Arabic poetry, the idea of death to be followed by rebirth was accompanied by a companion trope, where the poet, beset by the feeling of *al-ghurbah* ([الغربة] literally, “feeling like a stranger,” which segues into terms like “alienation” or “exile”),¹⁰⁹ pictured himself or herself as an exile, a wanderer “absorbed or imprisoned by memory, with all the implications of attachment to the past or yearning for release from regret.”¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁴ DeYoung (1998), 73–4. In 1955 al-Sayyab published a collection of translations entitled *Anthology of Modern World Poetry*, featuring T. S. Eliot, among other poets. The role of death and rebirth myths, together with Frazer’s *The Golden Bough* in Eliot’s *The Waste Land* is a further intertextual link. Al-Sayyab read Frazer in 1954 through the mediation of Jabra. See DeYoung (1998), 65–74.

¹⁰⁵ Starkey (2006), 83.

¹⁰⁶ See Creswell (2018). The title was inspired by Harriet Monroe’s famous “little magazine” of the same name. For a fuller treatment of the figure of Odysseus in Arabic poetry, see below.

¹⁰⁷ Starkey (2006), 83.

¹⁰⁸ Jayyusi (1992), 155.

¹⁰⁹ See DeYoung (2015), 319.

¹¹⁰ Musawi (2006), 162.

Many figures from history and myth became *doppelgängers* for this figure in Arabic literature, inspiring Modernist Arab poets, from Arabic literature's own Sinbad to the more exotic Latin poet Ovid.¹¹¹ But probably the most compelling archetype in the literature harks back to Sulayman al-Bustani's interest in Homer.¹¹² This is the figure of Odysseus from Homer's *Odyssey* and the adventures he experienced on his long and hazardous journey back home from the Trojan War to his native island of Ithaca. Odysseus is the figure of the wanderer, an exile who seeks to return home (the theme of *nostos*), at first believing this could be the case, but more and more finding that return impossible.¹¹³ Sayyab's work is a good example of this trajectory. Sayyab alluded to the conventional figure of Odysseus (that is, the wanderer who will one day return home) as early as 1947 in his poem "Passions" (أهواء [أهواء]).¹¹⁴ Then, in the late 1950s and early 1960s, he grew increasingly fond of invoking the name Sinbad instead of Odysseus, but the nature of both characters is very similar. What they both seek most is a resolution to the journey, in a return to the place from where they began their journey, to the harmony of home in Basra or Ithaca. A rebirth into a familiar, yet transformed, world is still possible. At the end of his life, a dying Sayyab undergoing treatment in London would be more pessimistic. In the poem "The Testament" (Al-Waṣīyah [الوصية], 1962) the narrator is first depicted as Odysseus who, "pursued by the vengeance of the gods" (lines 10–11) even after his return to Ithaca, sets sail once again, "not knowing whether he would return some other day to his home" (line 13).¹¹⁵ The parallel to Sayyab's journey to London for medical treatment seems to be consciously invoked here. By the end of the poem, the atmosphere of final death appears even more painfully omnipresent, but the identification of the narrator/patient has shifted to Sinbad:

أخاف أن أزلق من غيبوبة التخدير
إلى بحار ما لها من مرسى
وما استطاع سندباد حين أمسى
فيهن أن يعود للعود وللشراب والزهور

111 Musawi (2006), 174–6.

112 See above, pp. 56–8.

113 DeYoung (1998), 98; Khairallah (1997), 50–1.

114 DeYoung (1998), 99.

115 Quoted in DeYoung (1998), 105; Sayyab (1971), i.217–22.

[I am afraid that I will slide out of the painkiller's haze
 Into oceans that have no harbors.
 Where Sinbad, once he sets out,
 Cannot return to lutes, to wines and flowers.]

lines 30–33

The loss of hope is absolute. There will be no return for the speaker, but also no return for the culture heroes represented by either Odysseus or Sinbad. This element of estrangement or alienation permeates the poetry of Sayyab even before his illness, as he witnesses the failure of the 1958 revolution which, although it overthrew the British-supported monarchy, had been unable to establish a viable democratic state in its place. Neither the West nor indigenous institutions of the Arab world could provide the requisite role models.

The Lebanese poet of Arab nationalism, Khalil Ḥawī ([خليل حاوي] 1919–1982)¹¹⁶ projects a more consistent image by using Sinbad from the *Thousand and One* or *Arabian Nights* as an Arab stand-in for Odysseus in his most important collection of poems *The Flute and the Wind* (Al-Nay wa-al-Rīḥ [الناي والريح], 1961).¹¹⁷ For Hawi, Sinbad becomes a more balanced Arabic version of Odysseus: the wanderer who is better able to conclude his journey by a successful re-integration into society.¹¹⁸

But perhaps no poet better captures the ambivalence of Arab poets towards the figure of Odysseus than Adunis in his collection *Songs of Mihiyar the Damascene* (Aghānī Mihiyar al-Dimashqī [أغاني مهيار الدمشقي], 1961), using the persona of the eleventh-century Arabic poet Mihiyar al-Daylami:

حتى ولو رجعت يا أوديس
 حتى ولو ضاقت بك الأبعاد
 [...]

تظل تاريخنا من الرحيل
 تظل في أرض بلا ميعاد
 تظل في أرض بلا معاد

¹¹⁶ Hawi also wrote a critical study of Gibran (Hawi (1972)).

¹¹⁷ Khouri (1987), 130–1.

¹¹⁸ Khouri (1987), 130.

[Even if you come back, Odysseus,
 even if all those distances have hemmed you in, ...
 [...]
 You will still be a whole history of wandering,
 still be in an unanticipated land
 still in a land with no return.]
 lines 1–2, 6–8¹¹⁹

Here, the idea of return takes on a special resonance. Not every “going back” can be a return. As the critic As’ad Khairallah has eloquently noted: “The poet knows he must give up the search for a past Arcadia, the land of return, as well as for any external future land of promise.”¹²⁰ Nor are the terms of the challenge facing most modern Arab intellectuals likely to make this paradigm any less relevant.

10 Orpheus the Prophet

As a last indicator of the continued relevance of Graeco-Roman models to Arabic poetry, we need only consider that, for the poets of Arab Modernism, no persona has been more fraught with resonances than the image of a prophet.¹²¹ Like in Judaism and Christianity, in the Islamic world too the figure of the prophet as literary role-model has been potent. It is worth mentioning that the title adopted by the most famous practitioner of the Arab lyric art in the medieval period was al-Mutanabbī (c.915–965) or “the one who claims to be a prophet.” Similarly, we can see how the figure of the prophet-as-poet haunts the writings of Gibran, even to the level of being the title of his most famous work, *The Prophet* (1923, written in English). In general, this book is replete with references to canonical ideas about prophets from Hebraic religious traditions, but it also comprises one telling allusion to a Greek narrative of prophecy – in keeping with Gibran’s penchant for non-canonical references. The country where Gibran’s prophet Almustafa (in Arabic, “the chosen one,” an epithet frequently used for the Prophet Muhammad) reveals his message is called Orphalese, “a city called after Orpheus.” Almustafa “reveals the secrets of life [...] then sails serenely into death, for he is sure to be reincarnated in

119 Adūnis (1985), i.316; Adonis (2008), 55, the poem entitled “Land with No Return.”

120 Khairallah (1997), 58.

121 Wild (2001), 142, 149–50.

another prophet, when mother-life feels the need for it.”¹²² This incarnation of Orpheus (as the prophet of the Orphic mysteries), his hesitance and even failures to fulfil his mission (dramatized through the loss of his beloved Eurydice to death) is a rare, but immensely powerful trope when it is used in Modernist Arabic poetry.

As confirmation of this, one need look no further than the poem entitled “Orpheus” in Adunis’s *Songs of Mihyar the Damascene*:

عاشق أندرج في عتات الجحيم ...
 حجرا غير أني أضيء
 إن لي موعدا مع الكاهنات
 في سرير الإله القديم
 كلماتي رياح تهز الحياة
 وغنائي شرار
 إني لغة لإله يجيء
 إني ساحر الغبار

[I’m a lover, tumbling headlong into the dark of hell,
 like a stone, except I give off light.

I have a date with the priestesses
 in the old god’s bed.
 My words: winds that stir up life
 My songs: a shower of sparks.

I’m a language for a god who’s yet to come,
 the sorcerer of dust.]¹²³

Here, in a very condensed space, Adunis alludes to all the elements of the Orpheus legend: his doomed love for Eurydice, whom he loses to Hell, his words (the tools of a prophet) “that stir up life” (manifested in writing), his magical powers, and his power over music. These are all ways that poets like Adunis can relate to Orpheus. But one can also plausibly argue that this poem

¹²² Khairallah (1997), 46.

¹²³ Adūnis (1985), i.298; Adonis (2008), 47.

dramatizes the frustrations of that paradigm for modern Arab poets. *Mihyar* is about a poet-prophet who, unlike Gibran's Almustafa, fails in his quest. He is "the sorcerer of dust." The placement of the lyric at the mid-point of the whole cycle (the turning point) reinforces that identification.

These associations of Orpheus with the poet who cannot achieve his mission and thus become a true prophet continue on, however, after *Mihyar*. The Iraqi poet 'Abd al-Wahhab al-Bayati (عبد الوهاب البياتي [1926–1999]), in his collection *Writing on the Mud* (Al-Kitābah 'alā al-tīn [الكتابة على الطين], 1970), writes of Orpheus as a sorcerer and lover, but above all as a writer whose relationship with words is problematic¹²⁴ – therefore, in one way at least, as a prophet who has failed in his mission. These issues are highlighted in the conclusion to the poem "The Blind Sorcerer" [العراف الأعمى], where al-Bayati speaks in the voice of Orpheus:

... فأنا ساحر أموات القبيلة
 في مقاهي مدن العالم خيمت وفي أرصفة الفجر البليلة
 حاملا لوحا من الطين ونار البعث تسري في عروق الموميا
 تكتسي باللحم تحضر على الجدران أوراق المساء
 من يناديني –
 ومن يحمل انذار السماء.
 ويعاني في حضور الكلمات؟
 عودة الأرض إلى العصر الجليدي وإنسان الكهوف؟
 ويعني الساحرات
 والأميرات الصغيريات وموت القبرات؟

[Because I am the magician of the tribe's dead.

In the cafés of the world cities I pitched my tent, and on the wet side-walks of the dawn

Carrying a scripture of mud while the fire of resurrection ran through the mummy's veins

Clothed with flesh, the leaves of the evening are blooming on the walls.

Who will call me?

124 Salama (2001), 142 and 155–7. On al-Bayati, see also above, p. 72.

Who will carry the warning of heaven?
 Who will suffer in the presence of words
 Earth's return to the Ice Age and to the caveman?
 Who will sing to the witches,
 To the young priestesses, and for the death of sparrows?]

lines 29–38¹²⁵

This Orpheus has a “scripture” to convey, but it is written on “mud.” Furthermore, he must ask “Who will sing...” and leave it as a question, because he – unlike a religious prophet, certain at least of his calling – has no answer to give. Like the Odysseus/Sinbad of Modernist Arabic poetry, Orpheus too is an archetype that continues to have relevance to contemporary Arab poets as they write of their deracinating and inconclusive experiences, unlike Tammuz or Adonis of earlier poets.

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125 Salama (2001), 160 and 164.

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“Deeply Chiseled in a Calligraphic Style”

Graeco-Roman Appropriations and Modernist Historical Sense in Yang Mu’s Poetry

Michelle Yeh

關於希臘，我們其實保有很多想像，或者就說是回憶。

[When it comes to Greece, we actually hold a great deal of imagination – or, to put it in a different way, memories.]¹



This chapter provides the first comprehensive study of the use of ancient Greek and Roman allusions and motifs in the poetry of Yang Mu [楊牧] (Hualien County, Taiwan, 1940–Taipei, Taiwan, 2020). By focusing on representative works from his oeuvre, the chapter aims to shed light on how Yang’s appropriation of Graeco-Roman materials not only demonstrates his deep knowledge of Chinese and European literature and his Modernist historical sense but is also a powerful and creative expression of his poetics as a whole. Going beyond the traditional model of influence study, I propose a theoretical framework of cross-cultural intertextuality, creative rewriting, and cultural translation. The chapter contributes to the rapidly expanding field of comparative study of Graeco-Roman and Chinese traditions; the field of Graeco-Roman classical reception, in general, and of specific Greek or Latin authors (e.g., Virgil and Pindar), in particular, in the Chinese-speaking world; and that of Chinese literary Modernisms.²

- 1 Yang Mu (2013), 134, “Postscript” to his collection *Long and Short Songs*. The phrase of the title placed within inverted commas is from the opening poem of the collection, “Xila” [希臘] (“Hellas,” see below). Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from the Chinese are mine. The chapter is an expanded and revised version of Yeh (2019).
- 2 See, for example, Lloyd and Zhao (2018), and Renger and Xin Fan (2019); and Beecroft (2015) and Mutschler (2018) with references to the theoretical work of Yang Mu (C. H. Wang). For Chinese literary Modernisms, see Manfredi and Lupke (2019).

1 Yang Mu's Educational Background and Intellectual Affinities

Yang Mu, the pen name of Ching-hsien Wang [王靖獻] or C. H. Wang, is widely considered one of the greatest poets in the Chinese-speaking world. His output includes fifteen books of original poetry (among them a verse drama), most of which are collected in three volumes. Increasingly, his poetry is the subject of several studies; to date, at least one book in English and fifteen theses in Chinese have been published.³ He was also the recipient of many awards, including the prestigious National Award for Culture and Art in Taiwan (2000), the Newman Prize for Chinese Literature in the United States (2013), and the Cikada Prize in Sweden (2016).

One salient feature of Yang Mu is his dual identity as a major poet and an eminent scholar. He has been hailed as the founder of the School of Academic Poets (Xueyuanpai [學院派]) in Taiwan, a term that sometimes carries pejorative connotations but was nevertheless embraced by the poet.⁴ The epithet derives mainly from the fact that Yang held a doctoral degree from one of the most prestigious universities worldwide, the University of California, Berkeley; published scholarship in both English and Chinese; and had been a literature professor for more than four decades. In fact, his scholarship was closely intertwined with his creative writing, and his poetry bears witness to his deep engagement with world literature, without ever being bookish or pedantic. Yang Mu's educational background and intellectual affinities played a decisive role in the formation of his work, in which the Graeco-Roman world bears a special place, as we will see.

After completing a BA in English literature at Tunghai University in Taiwan in 1962 and his mandatory military service in 1964, Yang Mu left for the University of Iowa, at the invitation of Paul Engle (1908–1991), where he enrolled in the Iowa Writers' Workshop and received an MFA. Encouraged by Shih-Hsiang Chen [陳世驥] (1912–1971), a preeminent scholar in classical Chinese poetry and comparative literature, he went on to pursue a PhD in comparative literature at the University of California, Berkeley. As a graduate student there, Yang Mu focused on classical poetry from both Chinese and European traditions. After a short stint teaching at Princeton University and the

3 For a complete list of Yang Mu's works, see his website: <http://yangmu.com/books/>. The English study of Yang's work is Wong (2009). For the list of the fifteen theses, see the website: yangmu.ndhu.edu.tw/files/11-1122-16193.php; thirteen of them focus exclusively on Yang Mu, and the other two study Yang Mu and two other Taiwanese poets.

4 See Xi Mi (2011).

University of Massachusetts Amherst, he joined the faculty in the Department of Comparative Literature and the Asian Studies Program at the University of Washington in Seattle in 1974. In the ensuing decades, he also taught in Taiwan and Hong Kong and served first as dean of humanities and social sciences at the National Dong Hwa University in Hualien and then as director of the Institute of Chinese Literature and Philosophy at Academia Sinica, the premier research institute in Taiwan. In 2016 he retired from teaching, although he still held an endowed chair at the National Dong Hwa University in his hometown before he passed away on March 13, 2020.

Besides being a poet and scholar, Yang Mu was also a translator.⁵ When he was an MFA student at the University of Iowa, from 1964 to 1966, he translated Federico García Lorca's *Romancero gitano* (*Gypsy Ballads*) into Chinese, with the help of his professor Frederic Will and his classmate Robert Casto.⁶ In the last two decades of his life, Yang Mu published several volumes of Chinese translations of Western classics, including William Butler Yeats (in 1997), William Shakespeare's *The Tempest* (in 1999), an anthology of English poetry (in 2007), and the fourteenth-century chivalric romance *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (in 2016). The temporal and linguistic range of the translations speaks to his versatility.

The trajectory of Yang Mu's academic and literary career shows the poet's deep immersion in, and expert knowledge of, both Chinese and world literature, in particular, European literature. Scholars have often commented on the relations between his poetry and classical Chinese literature, on the one hand, and between his poetry and English Romanticism on the other. However, his use of Graeco-Roman classics has received little critical attention,⁷ despite the fact that the Graeco-Roman classical tradition is a key theme in scholarship on Romantic poets such as John Keats (1795–1821) and Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792–1822), or on Modernist poets, such as T. S. Eliot (1888–1965), that is, poets to whom Yang Mu had a special relationship. In what follows, an analysis of how Graeco-Roman motifs and allusions function in individual poems by Yang Mu reveals the important role they play in his poetry as a whole. This role goes beyond the semantic and the rhetorical levels, shedding light on the underlining poetics.

5 Yang has also edited an anthology of Tang poetry and collections of modern Chinese writers such as Zhou Zuoren [周作人] (1885–1967) (see also below), Xu Zhimo [徐志摩] (1897–1931), Xu Dishan [許地山] (1894–1941), and Zheng Chouyu [鄭愁予] (1933–).

6 He did this under the name Ye Shan [葉珊] (Ye Shan, 1966).

7 An exception is Liu Zhengzhong (2018).

2 The Scholar Yang Mu

At the University of Iowa, Yang Mu took German. As a PhD student at the University California, Berkeley, he studied more foreign languages, such as Old English, Japanese, and ancient Greek. The poem “Remembering Berkeley (Aorist: 1967)” (Huainian Bokelai [懷念柏克萊]), written in 1992, recalls a scene in graduate school when one day the poet was memorizing the conjugations of Greek verbs, hence the subtitle. As a junior scholar, in 1975 Yang Mu published a substantial essay entitled “Toward Defining a Chinese Heroism.”⁸ The essay opens with a reference to Virgil (70–19 BCE): “The *Aeneid* is an epic written in a concise, elliptical [sic] style to envision [sic] the destiny of Rome through a sequential depiction of the traces of Aeneas.”⁹ Based on this paradigm and drawing on the oral-formulaic theory of Milman Parry and Albert Lord about the making of Homeric verse and Medieval epic,¹⁰ Yang Mu goes on to analyze five poems from *The Book of Songs* or *Classic of Poetry* (Shijing [詩經]). This is the oldest collection of Chinese poetry which spans from the eleventh through the sixth century BCE and its editor is considered to be Confucius (551–479 BCE). As a whole, the five poems of *The Book of Songs* woven together and analyzed by Yang Mu paint a vivid picture of the founding of the Zhou Dynasty (1046–256 BCE) and center on the great king Wen. Hence, Yang Mu names them the *Weniad*, the Chinese equivalent of the *Aeneid*. In his conclusion, the poet remarks: “Collectively, the poems are comparable [...] to the victory odes of Pindar or Bacchylides.”¹¹ As we will see in the analysis of his poem “Pindar’s Ode – 472 BCE,” Yang Mu’s knowledge of these odes is deep and has left a clear mark on his poetry. Although he concurs with many comparatists that Chinese literature has no epics in the Western sense, Yang Mu believes that the *Weniad* expresses “an epic experience” of the early Chinese people;¹² but, in contrast to Western epics, which glorify war, the *Weniad* glorifies the storing away of arms – an image from *The Book of Songs*, connoting the cessation of warfare. And in a later essay entitled “Alluding to the Text, or the Context” (2002), Yang Mu argues that in both early China and ancient Greece, philosophers draw extensively on poetic allusions to convey their thoughts.¹³ Just as Confucius referred to *The Book of Songs*, so Plato referred to Homer.

8 Wang (1975), republished under the title “Epic” in Wang (1988), 73–114.

9 Wang (1988), 74.

10 Yang Mu’s first book, *The Bell and the Drum* (Wang (1974)), is based on his doctoral research on the oral-formulaic composition of early Chinese poetry.

11 Wang (1988), 114.

12 Wang (1988), 113.

13 Wang (2002).

Even before his Berkeley period, Yang Mu had already acquired a broad knowledge of Graeco-Roman literature and mythology. In 1964, he wrote a short essay titled “A Disillusioned Greek,” which begins with the question: “Where has Greece gone? Where has that magnificent civilization gone?”¹⁴ Employing the device of a letter sent by a fictitious Greek to a friend in Pompeii in Italy, the author concludes: “Greece has been lost in Christian mythology.” Thirteen years later, Yang Mu published the essay “Lost Paradise: A Literary Investigation,”¹⁵ which deals with the motif of the pursuit of paradise in Chinese and Western literature. Among the Western examples are the Homeric Epics, the Bible, the *Aeneid*, Dante’s *Commedia*, Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, Thomas More’s *Utopia*, and Thomas Carlyle’s *Past and Present*.

Interest in Greece also led Yang Mu to Zhou Zuoren [周作人] (1885–1967), a major essayist and translator in early modern China. In the 1980s, Yang Mu edited two volumes of *Selected Essays by Zhou Zuoren*. In 1993, he published a scholarly article on Zhou’s Hellenism, which delves into the enormous influence of Greek culture on the writer, which is no less than the influence of Japan, Zhou’s second home. In fact, Zhou first became interested in Greece when he was living in Tokyo, and much of his understanding came from Japanese sources. For Zhou, the two cultures bore some similarities. Not only did he translate a great deal of Greek literature, but he also used many Greek allusions and terms in his own writings. According to Yang Mu, Zhou believed that Greece – its mythology, epics, lyrical poetry, tragedies, and fables – offered an invaluable resource for China’s literary renaissance in the 1910s–1920s, such as its pursuit of truth, goodness, and beauty. But, while affirming Zhou’s rich knowledge of Greece, Yang Mu criticized some of his interpretations, as is evident in his conclusion: “Chou’s [sic] Hellenism is a Chinese conception.”¹⁶ Yang Mu’s view differs from earlier studies of Zhou Zuoren. His observation that Zhou embraced Greek culture but rejected Roman culture is acute. It also shows an interesting contrast between Zhou and Yang Mu himself.

3 The Young Poet Ye Shan: “To Athena”

In Yang Mu’s early poetry in the 1950s and early 1960s, written under the pen name Ye Shan [葉珊] (Jade Leaf), we can already tell that the poet is familiar with Greek mythology. We find, for example, references to Narcissus in the

14 “A Disillusioned Greek,” in Yang Mu (1979a), 63.

15 “Paradise Lost: A Literary Investigation,” in Yang Mu (1979b), 229–44.

16 Wang (1993), 395.

eponymous poem [水仙花] (1961); to *The Iliad* in “Farewell to Rainbow” (Cihong [辭虹], 1963); and to the goddess Demeter/Ceres in “Wild Field of Yellow Cauliflowers” (Caihua huang de yedi [菜花黃的野地], 1964). But the most significant example from the period is the poem “To Athena” (Gei Yadianna [給雅典娜]), written in 1964. It is the sixth in a sequence of seven poems Yang Mu wrote between 1962 and 1964; the others are “To Melancholy” (Gei youyu [給憂鬱]), “To Wisdom” (Gei zhihui [給智慧]), “To Fate” (Gei siwang [給命運]), “To Loneliness” (Gei gudu [給寂寞]), “To Time” (Gei shijian [給時間]), and “To Death” (Gei siwang [給死亡]). A dialogue with Keats (a poet to whom we will return later in the chapter) is clear here: suffice it only to mention Keats’s ode “On Melancholy” and that Yang Mu’s “To Wisdom” bears the subtitle “Sorrow is wisdom – Keats.”¹⁷ But the poem “To Athena” stands out right away, since it is the only one in the sequence that has a person (a Greek goddess) rather than an abstract noun as its title.¹⁸

The poem is divided into three sections: “Hunter of the Season” (Jijie de lieren [季節的獵人]), “The Classical Silhouette” (Gudian de cemian [古典的側面]), and “Elegy” (Aige [哀歌]).

The first section (“Hunter of the Season”) opens with a hunting scene, with images of horn, flute, hunter, and bonfire, in a cold, moonlit forest by the sea. In the ensuing stanzas, new contexts emerge as the poet introduces more images, such as a maiden returning with an earthenware jug, an apple orchard, a grape harvest festival, a man nursing the sword wound on his arm, and, as we read, “Antigone died in the cold cellar / a bleeding grave gazes at a star” [安忒格尼死在冷冷的地窖裡／流血的墳地，仰望一顆星].¹⁹ At the end of the section, hunting returns and Athena is named for the first time: “By the riverbank, on the hill, under the eaves of the temple / dewdrops are congealing – Athena’s tears” [在河岸，在山坡，在神廟的屋簷下／露水凝聚著，是雅典娜的淚].²⁰ The image of the maiden evokes multifarious references, prime among them Antigone, who died a virgin, and the two virgin goddesses, Artemis, the goddess of hunting, and of course Athena, the goddess of craftsmanship, wisdom, and war. As for the temple, it may well refer to the Parthenon, the temple dedicated to Athena Parthenos (Athena the Virgin or Athena the Maiden), patron

17 This phrase is taken from a letter by Keats in which he referred to Byron: “in fine, as Byron says, ‘Knowledge is Sorrow,’ and I go on to say that ‘Sorrow is Wisdom’” (Keats (2002), 123). In 1963–1965 Yang Mu wrote fifteen “Letters to Keats;” for an analysis, see Wong (2009), 192–200.

18 Three Greek goddesses are collectively known as the Fates (Moirai, Μοῖραι), but the poem “To Fate” clearly does not deal with them. For Keats’s famous odes, see Vendler (1983).

19 Yang Mu (1994–2010), i.310.

20 Yang Mu (1994–2010), i.310.

goddess of the city of Athens. The mention of Antigone is of particular importance here, since it stresses (through Sophocles' *Antigone* and its modern reception) the political and historical dimension of the poem.²¹

The second section of the poem ("The Classical Silhouette") depicts Athena's "classical silhouette" in the bronze moonlight, linking her directly with war: "Your cheeks are as red as battle flames / rising from the western edge of the city – words of withered leaves" [你的頰紅如戰火／自城的西沿升起 – 枯葉的語言].²² In contrast to connotations of martial might and victory, the first two sections of "To Athena" evoke decay and death, grief and mourning. The progress from "battle flames" to "withered leaves" suggests the bitter end of war. Together, they pave the way for the climax in the third and last section of the poem, "Elegy."

"Elegy" begins with such desolate images as "icy bell chimes," a fallen star, "weeping," tears, and grave. It also compares footprints to "scars," and the man in hiding to a "wandering slave." The poem ends with these two stanzas:

讓牧羊人在雅典娜的髮辮下
看到戰爭，榮華，花束，和沈思
誰將把病了的大地
誰將把病了的大地
在神話的嘯息裏，當麥子收成以後
帶回古典的讚美裏？啊，半島！
半島的長夜是雅典娜兩隻眼睛的
顏色，凝視許多亡魂的涉渡
從這個王國到那個王國

而當春日把草原用樹幹劃成
希臘的疆界，當葡萄在秋天成熟
大地流著，唱著一首歌，啊，雅典娜
誰在為抖索的獵人點燃曩昔的篝火²³

[Let the shepherd see, under Athena's braided hair
war, glory, bouquets of flowers, and meditation
Who will carry the earth that has fallen ill ...
who will carry the earth that has fallen ill
amid sighs of myths, after wheat has been harvested

21 For *Antigone's* modern reception, see Cairns (2016), 115–54.

22 Yang Mu (1994–2010), i.310.

23 Yang Mu (1994–2010), i.311–14.

back to classical tributes? Oh, peninsula!
 The long night on the peninsula is the color
 of Athena's eyes, gazing at the souls of the dead
 wandering from this kingdom, to that kingdom

Yet, when spring days mark the boundary of Greece
 with prairies and branches, when grapes ripen in autumn
 flowing across the earth and singing a song, Oh Athena
 who will light a bonfire of yesterday for the trembling hunter?]

The section brings together all the themes from the preceding sections: hunting, planting, herding, and death. In juxtaposing “war, glory, bouquets of flowers, and meditation,” which are associated with Athena, on the one hand, and the wretched earth, the lost souls of the dead, and the “trembling hunter” on the other, the poem suggests a connection between the immortal goddess and the mortal world at which she “gazes” with sympathy and sorrow. This is supported by the recurrent images of tears and weeping throughout the sequence, the juxtaposition between the goddess and the tragic figure of Antigone, and Athena’s eyes as dark as “the long night.” In short, she is portrayed as a sympathetic witness to human suffering.

In a 2004 lecture he gave at the University of Tokyo, Yang Mu recalled the circumstances of the composition of the poem.²⁴ It was inspired by a bronze statue of Athena in a photograph he had seen two years before – something which also brings to mind, through both its similarities and differences, Keats’s ode “On a Grecian Urn.” Yang Mu was “fascinated by the verdigris on the statue,” and described Athena’s “blue eyes, cold beauty, often dressed as a warrior in awesome armor, holding a spear and a shield.” All of these attributes are subtly captured in the poem.

As noted above, “To Athena” is the only poem in the sequence Yang Mu wrote in 1962–1964 which was not entitled after an abstraction, like wisdom or fate. However, the observation needs modification because, according to the poet, he did not treat Athena differently from the other topics. In fact, the sequence marks a threshold in the development of the poet’s thinking and writing:

24 Yang Mu (2005), 381, where Yang Mu also says that “To Athena” was written in Berkeley. This must be incorrect, since the poet first arrived in the United States in September 1964, and it was the University of Iowa, not the University of California, Berkeley, where he first studied. See his biography: Zhang Huijing (2002), 98.

我可能無端就厭倦了太多的感性抒情，精巧的隱喻，和象徵的雛形吧。我想創造另外一種語法，通過它來試探陌生或不尋常的理念，尤其抽象如憂鬱和寂寞之類，看看迥異的思維能不能尋到合適的藝術形式來展現它自己；而我應該只是一個見證的人，文字的組織者²⁵

[For some reason I became sick and tired of too many lyrical feelings, refined metaphors, and symbolic prototypes. I wanted to create another syntax, through which to explore unknown or unusual concepts, especially abstract concepts such as melancholy and loneliness, to find out if a different mode of thinking could find an appropriate art form to express itself; and I should only be a witness, an organizer of words.]

In the above-mentioned lecture in Tokyo in 2004, Yang Mu also invoked the 1816 “Hymn to Intellectual Beauty” by another great English Romantic, Percy Bysshe Shelley, as the inspiration for the entire sequence; he quoted the following lines from Shelley’s poem to describe his own growth as a young poet:

While yet a boy I sought for ghosts, and sped
 Through many a listening chamber, cave and ruin,
 And starlight wood, with fearful steps pursuing
 Hopes of high talk with the departed dead.
 I call’d on poisonous names with which our youth is fed;
 I was not heard; I saw them not;
 When musing deeply on the lot
 Of life [...]

lines 49–60²⁶

The poet’s account explains the rather unusual way in which the Greek goddess was represented in his poem. “To Athena” is a collection of somber vignettes of personas and scenes that evoke loss and destruction. For example, in the third section, “Elegy,” the images of burying “many sweet birthdays” under fallen flowers and leaves and “coloring Eirene a dark red of late autumn” are ominous and reinforce the section’s title.²⁷ Like Athena in the poem, the poet is a

25 Yang Mu (2005), 372.

26 Quoted in Yang Mu (2005), 374.

27 “Aiheni” [愛荷妮] seems to be the Chinese transliteration of the Greek name Eirene [Εἰρήνη], meaning peace. In Greek mythology, Eirene was one of the Horae, goddesses of the seasons. See, for example, the lines from *Olympian* 13 by Pindar: “For there [in Corinth] dwells Order [Eunomia] and her sister Justice [Dike] / firm foundation for cities,

sympathetic witness to the vicissitudes and sorrows in life on both the individual and the collective levels. Like the other poems of the sequence, "To Athena" is a young poet's "musing deeply on the lot of life," as we read in Shelley's "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty." The combination of the figures of Antigone, Athena, and Eirene in Yang Mu's poem also points to what he would analyze later in an essay entitled "Historical Sense," in which he highly recommended T. S. Eliot's views in his influential 1919 essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent."²⁸ The Anglo-American poet wrote: "The historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order."²⁹ The way in which Yang Mu referred to the Graeco-Roman tradition in his later poetry makes even clearer how he conceived of the combination of European tradition and the tradition of his own culture, or how history is actually re-interpreted from the modern perspective.³⁰

4 Yang Mu's Classical Rome: "Virgil"

A central element of Yang Mu's poetry is its creative reinterpretations of Chinese classics, often in the form of dramatic monologue. In articulating his poetics, he repeatedly emphasized how important it is for poets to have a solid command of classical Chinese literature. But he continued to draw on Western classics in his writings, poetry as well as prose. In December 1975 he wrote the poem "Virgil" [味吉爾]:

長髮在我左手臂上散開
這時你枕著黎明的風
風在我單薄破敗的袖中
我枕著味吉爾

這時你凝望窗前的燈
但我知道你在思想羅馬
除了流浪和建國的殺伐
你應該也記取一些美好的牧歌

and Peace [Eirene], steward of wealth for men, / who was raised with them – / the golden daughters of wise-counseling Themis" (lines 6–8; trans. William H. Race (Loeb)). For Yang Mu and Pindar, see also below.

28 Zhang Songjian (2019), 51.

29 Eliot (1951), 14.

30 See Yeh (1991), 28.

風來自嵯峨的金樹枝
而這裏有一片淡墨的寒林
寒林規劃著隱者的心
我讓你枕著黎明的手臂

我枕著味吉爾
聽到城的焚燒和頹落
兵刀棄在晨煙的原野上
海面一艘大船靜靜等候³¹

[Long hair spreading on my left arm
At this moment you rest your head on the wind of dawn
With the wind filling my thin and torn sleeves
I rest my head on Virgil

At this moment you gaze at the lamp
by the window, but I know you are thinking of Rome
Besides wandering and empire-founding slaughters
you should also remember some fine eclogues

The wind comes from the lofty golden bough
and here is a grove of bitter cold trees in pale ink
regulating the heart of the recluse
I'll let you rest your head on the arm of dawn

I rest my head on Virgil and
hear the burning and fall of citadels
Swords abandoned on the morning field
in haze, on the sea a large ship waits in silence]

The poem contains several images that evoke Virgil's *Aeneid*, including Aeneas' wandering after the fall of Troy, his descent into the underworld with the golden bough, and the founding of Rome. In addition, Virgil's *Eclogues*, a sequence of ten pastoral poems, is mentioned in the poem. *Eclogues* has a political dimension too, but by saying "you should also remember some fine eclogues," Yang Mu contrasts them with the *Aeneid*, juxtaposing the epic and the lyric, war and peace. The poet seems to be saying: Don't just read the great epic. Don't forget those fine lyrics!

31 Translated by Michelle Yeh and Lawrence R. Smith, with one modification, in Yang Mu (1997a), 112. Chinese original in Yang Mu (1994–2010), ii.176–7.

Lyricism mainly stems from the intimate relationship between the “I” and the “you” represented in the poem: she rests her head on his arm at the break of dawn while he rests his head on Virgil. The literal depiction morphs into the metaphorical or even surrealistic as she rests her head on the “wind of dawn” in line 2 and the “arm of dawn” in line 12. Similarly, when the image of laying his head on Virgil recurs in line 13, it may not be literal after all, but, rather, refers to ruminating on the *Aeneid* in his mind.

The last line is the key to understanding the poem. Why does Yang Mu return to the battle scene if the preceding lines have already touched on the plot of the epic? “[O]n the sea a large ship waits in silence” seems to refer to Aeneas and other survivors of the Trojan War, who are about to board the ship, to start their wanderings. But there is more meaning to it as it also applies to the lyrical moment that “you” and “I” share. The lyrical moment is one of “silence” as if time is standing still. Aeneas’ ship is yet to set sail; to embark on adventures or to live the life of a “recluse” is a real choice. It is a moment of possibilities, of different choices. If the “I” contemplates the fate of Aeneas, then “my thin and torn sleeves” suggests that he identifies more with the “recluse” than the hero.

In 1975, when he wrote “Virgil,” Yang Mu had well established himself in American academia. However, for a Taiwanese, he was probably dealing with some self-doubt and self-debate. Should he be content with the life of a scholar, or should he take part in the burgeoning democratization movement in his homeland? The inner struggle is not necessarily limited to the 1970s and 1980s, when full democracy was hard won in Taiwan; we catch a glimpse of it in his later poetry too. In 2001, Yang Mu published a book of poetry entitled *Intervention* [涉事]. The opening poem “The Vacated Seat” [卻坐] is a memory of the “I” in the “early years,” sitting at the desk reading a Medieval romance about the dragon-slaying hero coming to the rescue of the lady in distress. The poem ends with the image of an empty chair:

[...] 他的椅子空在
那裡，不安定的陽光
長期曬著³²

[[...] His chair sits empty
there, in the uncertain sunlight
basking hour after hour]

In the postscript to the book, Yang Mu explicitly contrasts himself with the hero in the poem: “pennants and sword are his advancing pose; poetry is my

32 Translated by Steve Bradbury in Yang Mu (2018), 123; Chinese original in Yang Mu (2001), 13.

act of intervention.” How does the poet “intervene” in society? As early as 1975, I submit, “Virgil” revealed his contemplation on the choice between art and activism.

5 Rewriting Pindar

Graeco-Roman sources continued to be an inspiration in Yang Mu’s later work. For example, we find references to Pythagoras (110–50? BCE) in the poems “Corroded” (Dushi [蠹蝕], 2000) and “Reading Dante at Year’s End – an edition with illustrations by Gustave Doré” (Suimo guan Danding – Gusidafu·Duorui chatuben [歲末觀但丁 – 谷斯達弗·朵芮插圖本], 2011; see below), also in relation to music, another major theme of Yang Mu’s poetry; to the Furies in the poem “Old-Fashioned Dialectics” (Laoshi de bianzheng [老式的辯證], 2005); and to Daedalus in the poem “Isaac the Scout” (Yisa chihou [以撒斥堠], 2001). Among the poems that deserve a closer look is “Pindar’s Ode – 472 BCE” (Pingdaer zuosong [平達耳作誦], 2000):

讚美他的馬術如專注凝視
一朵漩渦在急流裏短暫取得完整
美麗的形式，瞬息間
燦爛的細節超越擴大至於虛無

新生嬰兒在厚厚的白茅純束裏裹著
藏在金黃和深紫羅蘭的花叢
他浪跡的生父原本是神，之前
曾經，這一帶來回路過

而名字早由她親自交代給那一對
慈藹的蛇記得仔細，負責照顧他直到
起立能在三色堇野地裏和風賽跑的
那一對灰眼蟒蛇

唯獨她的下落我們一無所知
恐怕忽略在詩的修辭和韻類裏了
在讚美的形式完成剎那即回歸
虛無，如美麗的漩渦急流裏消逝³³

33 Translated by Wen-chi Li and Colin Bramwell in Yang Mu (2018), 134.

[Praise his horsemanship like a concentrated gaze
the vortex in a rushing current quickly takes form
impeccable and beautiful; in a flash
the brilliant details expand into nothingness

A newborn baby bundled in thick kunai grass
hidden in a gold and violet bush
his wandering father was once a god
and used to roam this place –

And yet, by her, his name was brought to
the memory of two kind grey-eyed serpents
who cared for him until he could stand
to race with the wind among pansies

Only her whereabouts are unknown to us
perhaps she is overlooked in the rhetoric and rhymes of poetry
where the form of praise is completed and at once returns
to nothingness, like a beautiful vortex vanishing in the current]

The title of the poem points to *Olympian* 6 by the Greek lyric poet Pindar (517–438 BCE), in honor of Hagesias' Olympic victory in the mule cart race in 472 (or 468) BCE. In Pindar's victory ode we read about the mythical pedigree of Hagesias, the co-founder of the city of Syracuse: Hagesias descended from the Iamidai, the family of seers founded by Iamus [Ἰάμος]. Iamus' father was Apollo and his mother was Evadne [Εὐάδνη], the daughter of Poseidon and the nymph Pitane; Evadne was raised by King Aepytyus, who had his home near the river Alpheus in Arcadia. Like her mother before her, Evadne hid her pregnancy, and after giving birth she abandoned her baby in a dark thicket. The baby survived as he was cared for by two snakes who fed him honey, and five days after his birth he was found alive and well, in a vast thicket of golden and purple pansies – hence his mother declared that her son would bear the name Iamus, meaning “of the Violets” (Pindar, *Ol.* 6, lines 53–7):

[...] ἀλλ' ἐν
κέκρυπτο γὰρ σχοίνῳ βατιά τ' ἐν ἀπειρίτῳ,
ἴων ξανθαῖσι καὶ παμπορφύροις ἀ-
κτίσι βεβρεγμένος ἄβρόν
σῶμα· τὸ καὶ κατεφάμι-
ξεν καλεῖσθαι νιν χρόνῳ σύμπαντι μάτηρ
τοῦτ' ὄνυμ' ἀθάνατον. [...]

[[...] he had been hidden in a bed of reeds within a vast thicket,
 while his tender body was bathed by the golden and purple rays
 of violets. That was why his mother declared that for all time he would
 be called
 by that immortal name [...]]³⁴

When he reached manhood, Iamus descended into the river Alpheus at night and called upon his grandfather, Poseidon, and his father, Apollo. Apollo's voice led Iamus to Olympia, where Apollo granted him the gift of prophecy. Apollo also ordered him to establish his oracle on the summit of Zeus' altar "when bold and resourceful Herakles / [...] should come / to found for his father [that is, Zeus] a festival thronged by people and the greatest institution of games" [εὖτ' ἂν δὲ θρασυμάχανος ἔλθῶν / Ἡρακλῆς, σεμνὸν θάλος Ἀλκαῖδαν, πατρί / ἑορτάν τε κτίσῃ πλειστόμβροτον τεθμόν τε μέγιστον ἀέθλων; Pindar, *Ol.* 6, lines 67–9] – that is, the Olympic games.

Yang Mu's rendition suggests creative fusions of multiple sources and introductions of new elements into the myth of Iamus as presented by Pindar. The first stanza emphasizes "his" skills as an equestrian ("impeccable and beautiful form") and "his" speed as a runner ("race with the wind") – there is some ambiguity in the reference of the personal pronoun. Based on Pindar's ode, "he" should be Hagesias, who is known for his athletic prowess. On the other hand, the rest of Yang Mu's poem focuses on Iamus and Evadne, and syntactically there is no hint of a switch in the reference of the personal pronoun from Hagesias to Iamus. Therefore, I suggest that the poem is about Iamus and his mother Evadne, with the opening stanza fusing Iamus with Hagesias for artistic purposes.³⁵

In the end, the ambiguity surrounding the first stanza of Yang Mu's poem may not require a definitive resolution because the poem is not so much about retelling the Greek myth as about Evadne, who, as we read, "perhaps is overlooked in the rhetoric and rhymes" – in fact, Pindar's *Olympian* 6 is the

34 Trans. by William H. Race (Loeb). The translators of Yang Mu's poem chose *pansies* instead of *violets* in translating the poem. Pansies, violets, and violas all belong to the genus *Viola* and are very similar; pansies have larger flowers than violets. In Pindar's ode, Evadne is described as "of the violet hair" [ἰόπλοκον Εὐάδναν], line 30.

35 Wen-chi Li (2016a) interprets the "he" in the first line as Hagesias. The poem must have also been informed by other odes by Pindar, especially those composed for Hieron (?–466 BCE), tyrant of Syracuse and an associate of Hagesias. Suffice it only to mention *Olympian* 1, composed for Hieron's victory in the single horse-race in the Olympic games of 476 BCE, in which features the story of Pelops, a superb charioteer trained by Poseidon, who went on to defeat King Oenomaus in a chariot race and marry his daughter Hippodameia. Hieron's victories were also celebrated by Bacchylides; see also above, p. 86, Yang Mu's reference to the "victory odes of Pindar or Bacchylides."

main source we have about her.³⁶ As for the modern reception of her myth, the poem “Evadne” by H. D. (Hilda Doolittle) has a special importance for our discussion, since we can assume that Yang Mu, with his deep knowledge of Modernist poetry, knew it – the word “vortex” itself might be an allusion to the early Modernist movement of Vorticism. Unlike in Yang Mu’s poem, in H. D.’s 1921 poem, Evadne is the narrator:

I first tasted under Apollo’s lips,
 Love and love sweetness,
 I, Evadne;
 My hair is made of crisp violets
 or hyacinth which the wind combs back
 across some rock shelf;
 I, Evadne,
 Was made of the god of light.

lines 1–8³⁷

Unlike in Yang Mu’s poem, in H. D.’s “Evadne” there is no reference to Iamus. The latter poem deals with Evadne’s erotic relationship with Apollo, while the former stresses that, as in almost all myths, in that presented by Pindar too, the mother (as well as the grandmother) of the hero plays the passive role of the receiver of the divine seed and fades into the background once the baby is born and the focus shifts to his fantastic adventures and superhuman feats. This is not only true of Graeco-Roman mythology – where violence is also a frequent element – but also of its Chinese counterpart as well. The story of Iamus bears a close resemblance to the Chinese myth of Hou Ji [后稷], literally “Lord Millet,” in the sequence that Yang Mu calls the *Weniad* in the above-mentioned essay.

No. 245 of *The Book of Songs* narrates the miraculous birth of Hou Ji. One day, the pious virgin Jiang Yuan [姜嫄] stepped on the footprint of God’s big toe and became impregnated. After the baby was born, he was abandoned to die in three separate attempts: first in a busy lane, but cattle and sheep protected him; then in a forest, but a woodcutter saved him; and lastly on frozen snow, but large birds gathered to shelter him with their wings. Hou Ji grew up to teach his people agriculture (growing grains and animal husbandry) and ancestor worship. A culture hero, he was also the progenitor of the great Zhou

36 See Gantz (1993), 63. On the role of Evadne in Pindar’s ode, see Stehle (1997), 160–9.

37 H. D. (1983), 132.

Dynasty. In the narrative poem of seventy-two lines, Hou Ji's mother, Jiang Yuan, is mentioned by name only once and is nowhere to be seen again after the birth of the baby.

Similarly, in Pindar's *Olympian* 6, we only follow Evadne's story until, and in relation to, her giving birth to Iamus. Yang Mu's "Pindar's Ode" seems to address this "oversight." The poem points out the mother's agency in both the naming of the baby (mentioned by Pindar), and his salvation by the two "grey-eyed serpents," something which in Pindar's ode is attributed to "the gods' designs" [δαίμόνων βουλαῖσιν]. Most importantly, the last stanza explicitly critiques the erasure of Evadne from the Greek myth. Eloquently, the poem ends with the recurrent image of a "beautiful vortex vanishing in the current." In its first appearance in the opening stanza, the vortex explicitly refers to horsemanship. It may also be read as an echo of Iamus' descent into the river Alpheus to pray to Poseidon and Apollo. The second time the image of vortex appears, it is part of the description of the "nothingness" following a moment of beauty. It may be interpreted as a subtle reference to the fading away of beautiful Evadne, who only appears as Iamus' mother in Pindar's ode. Still another possibility is that the vortex – with its "brilliant details" – refers to Pindar's ode itself or, more generally, poetry. We must not forget after all that Iamus' voice was also that of a seer, a feature reinforced by the image of the sweet honey brought to him by the two serpents. The elegiac tone in the recurrent image intimates Yang Mu's notion of art: art, whether horsemanship or poetry, is the perfection of form. However, in the boundless ocean of nothingness, whether life or Time itself, it is but an island, a small and isolated existence of beauty. Hence, the poet's effort to achieve beauty is all the more admirable and enduring.

Yang Mu's "Pindar's Ode" shows in the most compelling way his intimate engagement with the Graeco-Roman classical tradition and his artful way of allusion, informed by the Chinese classical tradition. More than a subject of academic study, Graeco-Roman literature and culture were an integral part of his poetry and poetics throughout his career.

6 Romantic Hellenism and Yang Mu's "Hellas"

As we have already seen, as a young poet, Yang Mu was greatly influenced by Keats. In October 1816, at the age of twenty-one, Keats wrote what is regarded as his first major work, the sonnet "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer." The poem compares the poet's sense of wonder in first reading Chapman's translation of Homer to that of the astronomer William Herschel in discovering the

planet Uranus in 1781, and that of the conquistador Hernán Cortés in first looking at the Pacific Ocean.³⁸ Yang Mu must have been familiar with the sonnet and understood the significance of European classics for Keats, who “at the age of twenty-one, held up Homer and Virgil as the artistic paradigms he aspired to” [濟慈 – 他二十一歲的詩就以荷馬和魏吉爾懸為藝術嚮往的鵠的].³⁹ Keats may well be seen as the guide to Graeco-Roman traditions for Yang Mu. In the eighth letter, entitled “Cold Rain” [寒雨], he wrote to Keats in the 1960s,⁴⁰ Yang recalls spending a winter translating *Endymion* and a conversation he had with a friend. Noticing his paleness, the friend mockingly says: “You feel tired because you’ve been following a nineteenth-century Romantic poet into the Middle Ages and ancient Greece.” Agitated, the poet interrupts him: “But the Romantics are innocent!”⁴¹

Yang Mu is never content with merely borrowing motifs and themes from Graeco-Roman texts, but he uses them in such a way that they are infused with new meanings. In 2013 he published his fourteenth, and last, poetic collection under the title *Long and Short Songs* (Changduange xing [長短歌行]). In the postscript to the book, we read: “when it comes to Greece, we actually hold a great deal of imagination – or, to put it in a different way, memories” [關於希臘，我們其實保有很多想像，或者就說是回憶。]. Yang Mu also speaks about the “vast, profound, and ever-present beauty and sorrow” in Greek mythology and how, based on its “versatile fables [...] we can construct the ethics and taste of our own generation” [挾其遼夔深遽和永不缺少的美麗與哀愁，曾經教我們追求之餘，也從而為其中變化無窮的寓言製作出我們自己一代的倫理和品味].⁴²

The collection opens with a sonnet Yang Mu wrote in 2009, simply entitled “Hellas” (Xila [希臘]). It is worth asking whether Yang Mu had Shelley’s work *Hellas* in mind. What is certain is that, given his familiarity with Shelley’s work, we can assume that he knew it – at least its “Preface” that comprises the phrases:

We are all Greeks. Our laws, our literature, our religion, our arts have their root in Greece. But for Greece, Rome, the instructor, the conqueror, or the metropolis of our ancestors, would have spread no illumination with

38 As has been pointed out, the first conquistador who reached the eastern shore of the Pacific was not Hernán Cortés but Vasco Núñez de Balboa in 1513. On Keats’s sonnet, see also Tambakaki, this volume.

39 Yang Mu (2005), 377.

40 See above, p. 88 n. 17.

41 Yang Mu (1986), 103.

42 Yang Mu (2013), 134 and 137.

her arms, and we might still have been savages and idolaters; or, what is worse, might have arrived at such a stagnant and miserable state of social institution as China and Japan possess.

A close look at “Hellas” sheds more light on Yang Mu’s poetics in how he views classical literature, including the Graeco-Roman – something all the more telling if the poem is seen in light of Shelley’s views:⁴³

諸神不再為爭座位齟齬
群峰高處鐫琢的石硤上深刻
顯示一種介乎行草的字體
乃是他（她）們既有之名，永遠的
浮雲飄流成短暫的殿堂，各自
佔有著，俯視遠處海水洶湧
發光，讓我們揣測那激盪的心

惟此刻一切都歸於平淡，就像
右前方那安詳坐著的小覲且依靠
一株海棠近乎透明地存在著（象
徵遺忘）對過去和未來
聽到的和看到的都不再關心，縱使
早期凡事擾攘遠近馳驟的赫密士
曾經奔走把彼此不安的底細說分明⁴⁴

[The deities no longer grind their teeth and fight for seats
On high mountaintops: stone deeply chiseled
in a calligraphic style between cursive and semi-cursive
exhibiting only their titles, these gods and goddesses –
each occupying a temporary palace of eternally drifting clouds
and surveying the surging, glistening sea below
So let us muse on the raging mind

But at this moment all has turned to calm
The young priest seated north-east against a begonia
leads a quiet and diaphanous existence (a symbol
of oblivion), no longer caring about the past

43 On “Romantic China,” see Kitson (2013).

44 Translated by Wen-chi Li and Colin Bramwell, with one modification in lines 7–8, in Yang Mu (2018), 174; Chinese original in Yang Mu (2013), 4–5.

and the future, what he hears or sees, even though
in early times when tumult reigned, swift Hermes
shuttled here and there, translating all the disquiet]

The depiction of Greek gods and goddesses rings familiar: they engage in petty squabbles for power or out of pride – Homer’s *Iliad* is replete with them. What is unexpected is the contrast between the “temporary” palace on Mount Olympus and the “eternally drifting clouds” in the first stanza. It is unexpected because we think of the deities, and their abode, as immortal, and able to control mists and clouds: “cloud-gatherer” [νεφεληγερέτα] is a typical Homeric epithet used for Zeus, the king or father of gods. But Yang Mu intentionally negates that.⁴⁵ I submit that the use of clouds here is reminiscent of classical Chinese poetry in which the image is recurrent and meaningful. Depending on the particular text in which it appears, clouds may suggest freedom, opacity, mutability, or impermanence. One of the most famous examples is the poem “Farewell” (Songbie [送別]) by Wang Wei [王維] (699–761):

下馬飲君酒
問君何所之
君言不得意
歸臥南山陲
但去莫復問
白雲無盡時⁴⁶

[We dismount and I offer you a cup of wine
May I ask, where are you bound?
You say that you’re down on your luck
And will go live at the foot of Mount South
Go then, I shall ask no more
There is no end to white clouds]

Wang Wei was an official serving in the court of the Tang Dynasty, and in the poem the speaker addresses a former colleague who is leaving the capital to live the life of a hermit. Traditionally, the image of cloud is interpreted in two ways. First, it connotes freedom. When applied to the poem, it suggests that, like clouds unfurling and floating freely, the poet’s friend is finally liberated

45 The Greek comedy *The Clouds* by Aristophanes (450–c.388 BCE) might come to mind, but there is little intrinsic correspondence between the two texts.

46 Wang Wei (1974), 38.

and no longer has to deal with court intrigues. Another meaning of cloud is resignation. The poet may look on the bright side, but there is no denying that his friend's departure is the result of adverse circumstances.

I submit yet another interpretation. The "endless" white clouds might also evoke uncertainty, mutability, and impermanence. Just as clouds are ever-shifting and impossible to pin down, so is worldly fame and glory. In other words, the only thing that doesn't change in life is change itself. This is further substantiated by the fact that Wang Wei was a devout Buddhist, and impermanence is a fundamental tenet in Buddhism. If in traditional China government service was virtually the only path to, and standard for, success for men, the poet reminds his friend of the sobering truth that any success is temporary, even illusory. This reading is not incompatible with the other two interpretations mentioned above, but it actually strengthens the idea of consolation; to the friend whose political career has not gone well, the poet speaks of his departure as a silver lining or a blessing in disguise.

Returning to Yang Mu's "Hellas" we find that the image of "eternally drifting clouds" takes on a richer meaning in light of the Chinese poetic tradition. Clouds are an eternal reminder of impermanence. Through the device of cross-cultural intertextuality, Yang Mu gives a new twist to the representation of the Greek gods and goddesses by suggesting that all the squabbling, all the passion – like the "surging" and "raging" sea – comes to naught in the end.

We should also note that the poem juxtaposes white clouds and the names and titles "deeply chiseled" on Mount Olympus in calligraphic flourishes. There is a sharp contrast between these two images: between the immateriality and mutability of clouds and the solidity and durability of stone. The mention of cursive and semi-cursive writing evokes Chinese calligraphy, an ancient art form that is inseparable from the reverence for the written language since the beginning of Chinese civilization. The Chinese connotation of the image of carved names is clearly intended by Yang Mu. As Wen-chi Li insightfully remarks, it suggests the enduring value of mythology; distant in time as it may, it is indelible in "literary history" and "contemporary consciousness."⁴⁷ Like the clouds, calligraphy gives us another example of cross-cultural intertextuality.

The second stanza presents a scene that is dramatically different from that in the first stanza. In contrast to the loquacious deities, the young priest sits quietly and no longer cares about – or remembers – the squabbles among the gods. Structurally, "Hellas" is divided into two seven-line stanzas. Yet, it is not a sonnet in any traditional sense. For Yang Mu, who was familiar with European sonnets and had written quite a few sonnets throughout his career, this is not

47 See Wen-chi Li (2016b).

accidental. By dividing the poem into two stanzas of equal length, he gives equal weight to the gods and the priest. In doing so, he not only juxtaposes the “raging” world in the first stanza and the “quiet” world in the second but also decidedly elevates the young priest. In his postscript to *Long and Short Songs*, Yang Mu identifies the priest with Hermes, who is named at the end of the poem. The identification sheds light on the meaning of the poem. The messenger for gods and goddesses, Hermes shuttles between Mount Olympus and earth, as aptly symbolized by his winged cap and winged sandals. However, in the poem, rather than the busy messenger who is privy to all the secrets and machinations, he lives in oblivion.

Perhaps the transition from Hermes to the young priest also suggests the end of the age of myth and the post-myth world. For Yang Mu, Greek myths – those “tales that render us dumbfounded” [讓我們瞠目結舌的故事] – symbolize “the countless aspirations or longings in the world, or pursuits to which we repeatedly commit ourselves with our hearts and blood, such abstractions as beauty and truth, that in distant antiquity encountered us, again and again, in a form that was crystal clear” [世間紛紛無數的憧憬或嚮往，或我們一再承諾以心血交付的追求，例如心目中何等抽象的美與真，曾經在渺茫的古代以一種完全透明的型態與我們一再遭遇].⁴⁸ The poet calls it the “collective memory” of humankind. What Yang Mu is doing symbolically is “invoking the gods,”⁴⁹ in the words of Li Wen-chi, and, in so doing, affirming the importance of Graeco-Roman myths in his poetics.

The nostalgic tone with which Yang Mu speaks of Greece in the postscript goes beyond his love of Greek mythology to revolve around remembrances of his youth, which are inextricably bound with who he is and will be. The poet cannot bring himself to “part with that feeling and would rather be immersed in a nearly unconscious state of being, to entangle with the past, resisting yet welcoming it, in order to search for and find the self of the present” [捨不得脫離那感覺，寧可沉湎在那接近無意識的狀態，和過去纏綿迎拒，目的還是為了尋獲現在的自己].⁵⁰

In this sense “Hellas” is, in the final analysis, about self-representation. The priest/Hermes in the second stanza may be seen as a persona of the poet. If three decades earlier, in the poem “To Athena,” the poet projected himself onto Athena bearing witness to human vicissitudes, now he identifies with the young priest. As the medium between the divine and the mortal world, he alone commands a panoramic view of the past and the future. And unlike the mighty Olympians, he has a Zen-like clarity of mind and exudes an air of

48 Yang Mu (2013), 135–6.

49 Wen-chi Li (2016b).

50 Yang Mu (2013), 137–8.

transcendence. The image reminds us of these famous lines by Wang Wei: “In my old age, I only love quietude. / A thousand affairs, no longer my concern” [晚年唯好靜，萬事不關心].⁵¹ In his insightful study, Liu Zhengzhong cites “Hellas” as a classic example of Yang Mu’s “late-period writing” [晚期書寫]: “All has returned to ‘this moment’ of simplicity, which not only refers to us moderns who are latecomers but also perhaps signifies the state of aging” [一切歸於平淡的‘此刻’，既是指我們這些遲到的現代人，似乎亦指涉一種老境].⁵² As a motif and a style, Yang Mu’s reflection on aging reminds us of Yeats, another poet Yang Mu has emulated throughout his career and has translated into Chinese, as we have seen.⁵³

7 “The Most Beautiful Soul in European Civilization”

Ever a classicist at heart, Yang Mu turns to Dante to construct an allegory of the poet’s journey. In 2011, he wrote “Reading Dante at Year’s End – An Edition with Illustrations by Gustave Doré” [歲末觀但丁 – 谷斯達弗·朵芮插圖本], in which, as we saw, a reference to Pythagoras appears. This is not the first time Dante appears in Yang Mu’s work. The poem “Southern Mound” (Nangai [南陔]), written in 1978, quotes from Dante’s *La Vita Nuova*: “Tutti li miei penser parlan d’Amore” (“All my thoughts always speak to me of love”). Juxtaposing him with the Confucian view on poetry, the poem refers to Dante as “the most beautiful soul in European civilization” [但丁是歐洲文明最美的靈魂].⁵⁴ Again, the key role played by Dante in Romantic and Modernist literature must be kept in mind in order to appreciate Yang Mu’s engagement with classical tradition.⁵⁵

“Reading Dante at Year’s End” is a dramatic monologue divided, like Dante’s *Divina Commedia*, into three sections, and opens with the same image of being lost in a dark wood:

我也曾經迷失於極黑的樹林，屢次
懷抱偶發，不完整的信念且以
繁星無移的組合與怎樣就觸及的
血之流速相對照明⁵⁶

51 Wang Wei (1974), 94.

52 Liu Zhengzhong (2018), 147.

53 Yang Mu (1997b).

54 Yang Mu (1994–2010), ii.201.

55 See, for example, Eliot’s seminal (1929) essay “Dante” (Eliot (1951), 237–77); Goldwyn (2016); Havely (1998).

56 Translated by John Balcom in Yang Mu (2018), 181; Chinese original in Yang Mu (2013), 112.

[I too once lost my way in a dark wood, more than once
embraced spontaneous, fragmented beliefs and illuminated them
with stationary constellations and swiftly flowing blood]

Although the poem borrows many images and references from the *Commedia*, it is not a religious allegory but a poetic journey. The speaker is seeking to lay

設定詩的境界建立在交織的線索
形繪，或一種沉淪再生的音響漸行
漸遠遂流於晦澀與
虛無。⁵⁷

[[...] a foundation for
establishing a poetic world on a diagram
of interwoven clues or a sound drowned and reborn
journeying gradually into obscurity and
the void. [...]]

The speaker describes himself as a “banished” man, a “shabbily clothed pilgrim,” who looks not only to Virgil, Dante’s guide, but also to Dante himself for guidance. As a self-declared “skeptic” of all institutionalized religions, the destination of his journey is not heaven but poetic art. Despite the difference, he calls out to the two classical poets for guidance.

Poetic art as a journey is elaborated in the second section of the poem. The poet reflects on how to create anew, beyond tradition, through experiments in language:

惟有文字，字在充份的質詞定義之下
通過空洞的語助單位暗中使力，惟有實與
虛字的指認，歸納，分類，並嘗試賦予
各別的名俾使繼承傳統
給出意義，是我們探求的全部－
險巇的路。⁵⁸

[Only the word, the word thoroughly defined
via the secret power of empty auxiliaries, only the recognition, induction,
and classification

57 Yang Mu (2018), 181; Yang Mu (2013), 113.

58 Yang Mu (2018), 182; Yang Mu (2013), 116.

of notional and functional words, as well as attempting to give an individual name to each for the continuation of tradition and to provide meaning. This is all that we are searching for – a dangerous road.]

Yang Mu suggests that it is a “dangerous road” that leads to poetry, but all poets must take on the challenge in order to create their own “self-contained universe.”⁵⁹ In this context he invokes three ancient Roman poets, who also appear in the *Divina Commedia*: Ovid (43 BCE–17 CE), Lucan (39–65 CE), and Juvenal (55?–127 CE):

奧義勢必游離，甚至
鳩芬落與盧坎都在所難免：
[...]

啊自閉的宇宙
甚至奧維德的創生神話也悵然惘然
繞著自己份內的嬗遞系統反覆吟詠
和其他所有雄辯的文體一晌同歸
寂寞：啊但丁·亞歷吉耶雷⁶⁰

[the hidden meaning is bound to be ambiguous, even
difficult for Juvenal and Lucan to avoid
[...]]

O! self-contained universe
even Ovid's *Metamorphoses* disappoints
circling its obligatory genealogy repeatedly intoned
along with the other eloquent genres returning to the same
loneliness: ah, Dante Alighieri]

By the time Yang Mu wrote this poem, he had had a career of forty-five years, had been a towering figure on the poetry scene in Taiwan and had exerted significant influence on younger poets in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Sinophone Southeast Asia for three decades. Yet, as he aged, and as he delved deeper into the nature and art of poetry, he seemed to find it increasingly more evasive as

59 Yang Mu (2018), 182–3; Yang Mu (2013), 116–17.

60 Yang Mu (2018), 182–3; Yang Mu (2013), 116–17.

an object of pursuit. In 1993, in the poem “To the Angel” (Zhi tianshi [致天使]), the poet had implored:

天使－倘若你不能以神聖光榮的心
體認這纖錦綿密的文字是血，是淚
我懇求憐憫⁶¹

[O Angel, if you with your holy glorified mind could not
understand these hard-wrought words as blood and tears
I pray for your mercy]

Written eighteen years later, “Reading Dante at Year’s End” speaks of the poet’s “purgatory” with images of powerlessness, loneliness, blood, and tears. The same imagery continues into the third section, in which the Big Dipper dims and is compared to a “forgotten chessboard arrangement.” The poet is compared to a tired but resilient man and a monk in a Medieval monastery. It is toward the end of the poem that the ability of words properly arranged to bring new life is reaffirmed:

在更空洞，寂寥的僧舍角落
經典翻開到無窒礙的一頁：早期
最繁複的句子通過新製，流麗的
標點栩栩若生，生動的符號扣緊
一齣不合時宜的悲喜劇，死去的神和
倖免的溺海者在譯文裏重組嶄新的
格律⁶²

[In an emptier and lonelier corner of a monk’s quarters
a classic is opened to an unobstructed page: the most complicated
sentences from early times vividly come to life
through new and judicious punctuation, vivid marks that bind
an outmoded tragicomedy, dead gods and
shipwreck survivors reorganizing an entirely new meter in translation]

61 Translated by Wen-chi Li and Colin Bramwell in Yang Mu (2018), 94; Chinese original in Yang Mu (1994–2010) iii.169.

62 Translated by John Balcom in Yang Mu (2018), 183; Chinese original in Yang Mu (2013), 118.

Immediately following these lines appears the image of the “purgatory of a multitude of poets.” Like “shipwreck survivors,” poets use an “as yet unripe dialect” to rekindle the “spark of prophecy” and make it shine as they pass through the “unfamiliar wilderness and outskirts.” The road ahead will be tough, but the concluding image of rising “to the zenith” of the sky harbingers hope of redemption and rebirth. Evoking the tripartite structure of the *Commedia*, “Reading Dante at Year’s End” presents an intense, albeit greatly condensed, journey of the poet through Inferno and Purgatorio before reaching Paradiso. If the *Commedia* is an allegory, then “Reading Dante at Year’s End” is a modern allegory built on the classical allegory.

8 Conclusion

Alongside classical Chinese poetry and traditional and modern English poetry, Graeco-Roman texts, especially mythological and poetic texts, were a major influence on Yang Mu and played a significant role in his scholarly and creative work from the 1960s until his death. The above analysis focuses on the most creative and meaningful ways in which the poet appropriated classical materials. Discussed in chronological order from the 1960s to the 2000s, the poems “To Athena,” “Virgil,” “Pindar’s Ode,” “Hellas,” and “Reading Dante at Year’s End” illustrate the use of Graeco-Roman allusions and texts as vehicles for expressing Yang Mu’s contemplations on life and poetry.

To be more specific, Yang Mu’s appropriations of classical materials are creative in two ways. First, his perspectives are uniquely “modern” in bringing to the fore what is traditionally ancillary or marginal in the original sources. Thus, “Pindar’s Ode” endows agency to the hero’s mother and subverts the patriarchal order of the Greek myth. The approach is distinctly Modernist and feminist. Second, Yang Mu’s representations of Graeco-Roman myths are infused with subtle Chinese connotations. Images such as clouds and calligraphic scripts in the poem “Hellas” take on a richer and deeper significance through Chinese poetry and culture, and becomes a representative example of how Yang Mu, a Taiwanese poet with international studies and career, conceives of Eliot’s “historical sense.”

The above analysis shows the complex and multifarious nature of literary relations. It is an oversimplification to regard the use of Graeco-Roman motifs in Yang Mu’s poetry as a one-way influence, of the source on the receiver. What we have seen are cross-cultural intertextuality, creative rewriting, and cultural translation, all happening simultaneously. One cannot tell where

Graeco-Roman mythology ends and Yang Mu begins. The former is fully integrated into the poetic vision of the latter. In breathing new life into ancient Graeco-Roman materials, Yang Mu created a Chinese poetry that is solid, versatile, and modern.

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Black Poetry and the Classics

A Primer to the Power of Language

Patrice Rankine

Ware!

Those eyes are basilisk's she gazes through,
And those are snakes you take for strands of hair!

COUNTEE CULLEN, "Medusa"¹

• • •

I no longer read poetry.
I read obituaries,
horoscopes,
the classified ads, telephone directories
and notes to myself.
I no longer read poetry.

HEATHER ROYES, "I No Longer Read Poetry"²

• •
•

Two epigraphs, one originating in the United States, from Countee Cullen's (1903–1946) publication *The Medea and Some Poems* (1935), the other in the Caribbean, from contemporary Heather Royes (b. Jamaica 1943),³ capture the often-ambivalent relationship between Black writers and the classical form. This essay lays out some terms regarding the begged questions raised in the title, "Black poetry and the classics." In the first place, for example, it will be

¹ Lines 3–4; in Garber and Kenan (2003), 88. See below, pp. 129–31. For Jacque Fetrow, who transformed leadership into poetry, and for whom I discovered the culminating poem of this essay.

² Lines 1–6; in Brown and McWatt (2009), 197. See below, pp. 116–17.

³ From her publication *The Caribbean Raj* (1996).

worth defining the parameters of the Blackness called upon. The triangular relationship between Africa, Europe, and the Americas that Paul Gilroy maps in *The Black Atlantic* is helpful here.⁴ For Gilroy, the triangle began with the Transatlantic Slave Trade across the Atlantic Ocean and included North and South America, the Caribbean, and Europe. Within the triangle new cultural artifacts appear, and poetry is no exception. As it pertains to the deployment of Greek and Roman texts and images, Barbara Goff and Michael Simpson have coined a “Black Aegean” that valorizes ancient European influences from which writers in the Black Atlantic pull.⁵ Within the Black Atlantic/Black Aegean discussion, this essay focuses on works of a few Anglophone authors from the United States and the Caribbean. If space allowed, it could have touched upon another node, the relationship between Africa and the United Kingdom.

For the purpose here, it is worth exploring why a poem like Cullen’s “Medusa” is inscribed in the Black Atlantic rather than simply being a poem on a classical myth written, simply, by an American author. Royes’s countervailing gesture of *not* reading poetry, even as she writes these words *in a poem*, speaks to a constant tension that Black Atlantic authors express vis-à-vis the classical form, that of whether poetry itself can bear witness to Blackness. Royes’s poem, even *qua* poem, articulates the reasons for this tension. It will be worth spending some time below, then, on what is meant here by Blackness, how the poets see that identity, and how it is in tension with the classical form of poetry. Although the survey is confined to the Anglophone, Black Atlantic world, particularly the United States and the Caribbean, the views it offers are applicable to other contexts, whether Spanish, Lusophone, Francophone, or otherwise.

1 Poetry: Scope, Impact, and Potential for Black Authors

In describing what is meant here by *poem*, the Merriam-Webster dictionary defines a poem as “a piece of writing that usually has figurative language and that is written in separate lines that often have a repeated rhythm and sometimes rhyme.” For the purpose of this essay, a poem is a self-contained unit, through which the writer conveys a vision of the past, present, or future. Here the notion of form is essential to how the genre functions, and Terry Eagleton’s emphasis on a return to formal attributes (meter, language, style) to derive

⁴ Gilroy (1993).

⁵ On the Black Aegean, see Goff and Simpson (2007). Regarding how authors “pull” Classics into post-colonial settings, see Goff (2005).

meaning is well-taken.⁶ *Form* comes as the first signal that we are in the classical genre of poetry. One might draw from any number of poetic verses to make the point, whether Sapphics or hexameter. Free verse might also have figurative language and repeated rhythm without rhyme.

While there are other treatments of a “poem” and “poetry,” it is necessary in this context to limit what would otherwise be a sprawling, uncontainable conversation. Epic, for example, is squarely in the frame of the definition of poetry, but because of its length, the genre is beyond the scope of this essay, which surveys a few shorter poems to illustrate broader points that can also be applied to these longer works. Thus, space here does not allow for the full treatment of the genre of epic or an epyllion. Gwendolyn Brooks’s (Topeka, Kansas 1917–Chicago, Illinois 2000) epyllion “The Anniad” (1950) (an example from the United States) or Derek Walcott’s (Castries, St. Lucia 1930–Cap Estate, St. Lucia 2017) epic *Omeros* (1990) (from the Caribbean) have been treated elsewhere.⁷ As a critic, the poet Derek Walcott has much to posit regarding poetic form as a particular pursuit.⁸ The nature of this essay, as a brief survey, forces a choice to treat *short* poems, self-contained units that might be read or recited in a matter of minutes. This will allow, in many cases, the analysis of an entire work. These analyses, as it pertains to Blackness, could well apply to longer pieces.

Authorship is as significant here as genre. The first move in this essay is to establish poetic form and how it may be in tension with racial identity. Many of the authors covered here are self-defined poets, who recognize that reading poetry and writing about it are activities quite different from reading or writing, for example, a play. The self-consciousness of the writer calls attention to the expectation – often refuted – that Black authors should write on racial themes, which was the norm in the early twentieth century. A Black poet might declare, through his or her topic, an interest that jars the ordinary expectations of the reader of poetry. The second move is to amplify the cursory definition of Blackness, such that the oxymoron of the “Black poet” has some significance, before homing in on the question of the Black poet and the Classics, defined as attention both to form and to themes and topics directly drawn from the Greek and Roman worlds. That is, once Black poetry is established as a phenomenon worthy of intellectual pursuit, it is possible to introduce the question of the Classics and that of any classicism in Black poetry. On the one hand, poetry itself is a classical genre, and therefore any Black writer pursuing it might be

6 See Eagleton (2006). For a skilled review of the book, see Furr (2007).

7 On Brooks, for example, see Walters (2007); Walcott has been treated extensively, including Greenwood (2010) and McConnell (2013).

8 See, for example, Edwards and Walcott (1996).

said to be classicizing. That said, this essay is concerned with a *heightened* classicism in Black poetry, beyond the basic, formal pursuit of poetry, in the shape of deliberate, direct references to classical texts, ideas, or figures from mythology.⁹

1.1 McKay's "*The Lynching*"

Though not expressly classical in its theme yet certainly in its form,¹⁰ a brief analysis of Claude McKay's (Clarendon Parish, Jamaica 1889–Chicago, Illinois 1948) sonnet is warranted to illustrate the tension that sometimes exists in Black poetry between form and function, realism and symbolism. The foundation of "The Lynching" (from *Harlem Shadows*, 1922)¹¹ will help make a deeper connection to the classicism of Black writers later, when the reading of "Medusa" is offered.¹² McKay was a little older than Cullen, and his poem allows the reader into an overtly Black Atlantic theme, in contrast to classicizing poems such as Cullen's "Medusa," where the relevance is not immediately apparent (at least not from the classical title).

In its photographic realism, "The Lynching" has more in common with Martin Carter's (Georgetown, Guyana 1927–Georgetown, Guyana 1997) "University of Hunger" (from *Poems of Resistance*, 1954) in the Caribbean than it does with many European sonnets, which is understood to be the poetic verse for love (e.g., Shakespeare's sonnets). This commonality, the connection, is what positions the pieces within the Black Atlantic. The photographs of the civil-rights era photographer Gordon Parks (1912–2006) might reveal that even realism is constructed, and yet McKay uses the artificial form of the sonnet to contrast the harsh and bitter hatred that left many Black American men hanging from trees throughout the late nineteenth century and the better part of the twentieth. The realism is similar to that which riddles Royes's "I no longer read poetry," where the quadripartite repetition of the phrase "I no longer read poetry" might seem banal. In the obituaries, horoscopes, and ads that Royes reads are matters that link to a broader, imagined community,¹³ the "horizontal kinship" that makes of a stranger a countryman. By "no longer read[ing] poetry," Royes signals the realism of life as it is in the Caribbean, through a poem. If Royes's reading list, in lieu of poetry, are fragments that comprise the

9 Recent treatments of the subject, broadly, include Barnard (2017).

10 See Denizé and Newlin (2009). The rhyme-scheme of the sonnet is *abba cddc effe*, ending with a *gg* couplet.

11 In Johnson (2008), 72–3; McKay (2004), 176–7.

12 The reading here is very different from the quick overview in Dorsey (1969).

13 See Anderson (2006).

Caribbean nation, it is also the diasporic reality that influences McKay. Royes, however, calls into question the entire genre as an avenue for Black expression.

McKay's "The Lynching" also conveys the potential disconnection between form and content, although it does so by mastering form. The poem opens with the iambic and alliterative phrase "His spirit is smoke" that gives symbolic value to lynched people, many of whom, from Reconstruction through the Second World War, were Black men in the United States. The poetic symbol also reflects artistic realism. As historical sociologist Orlando Patterson elucidates in *Rituals of Blood*, the smoke of the burned, lynched body often comingled with the smell of the BBQ that followed those mob gatherings: spirit is smoke.¹⁴ Lynching, Patterson counterintuitively offers, was a profoundly Christian ritual, in which the body of the lynched person became a host that united a community, transforming the mob into something sacred. In McKay's poem, a reference in the second line to the lynched person's "father" sets the stage for the religious (Christian) contextualization, in which the Father, God himself, "had bidden" his Son "to his bosom once again." The dead becomes a martyr, but despite the sacrifice, "The awful sin remained still unforgiven" (line 4). The sacrifice needs a sin for which it atones. In this case, the sin could be the lynching itself, or the false accusation that often follows the lynched victim, as the mob seeks symbolic justice. The imagery associates the lynched body – the sin, and forgiveness – with Jesus on the Cross, making the poem simultaneously a reflection of an American reality, and at the same time deeply symbolic of a sacred ritual.

An argument could be made, in fact, that a weakness of the poem, and perhaps of many of the period, is that it presses its imagery to extremes. Whereas the star that guided Mary and Joseph to the Manger was a good omen, for the lynched person, as martyr, the star "Hung pitifully o'er the swinging char" (line 8). The North Star held no ambiguity for Christ and his followers, but in McKay's poem this star guides the lynched only to give "him up at last to Fate's wild whim" (line 7). The propitious star, which portends the birth of Christ, turns ominous, a treacherous sign for the lynched. The lynching and thus the loss of life is senseless, a "wild whim." And contrary to those that come to see Christ only to find an empty tomb, this "ghastly body" kept "swaying in the sun" (line 10).

Never mentioning race, McKay is able to contrast the woman's "eyes of steely blue" (line 12), perhaps an echo of Mary and Martha seeing an empty tomb, with the "dreadful thing" (line 14). The Negro, a category neither fish nor fowl, is ever-present, haunting while Christ's body has disappeared into ethereal

14 Patterson (1999).

glory. The closing couplet of the poem, “And little lads, lynchers that were to be, / Danced round the dreadful thing in fiendish glee” (lines 13–14), prepares the way for James Baldwin’s (New York City 1924–Saint-Paul-de-Vence, France 1987) short story “Going to Meet the Man” (1948),¹⁵ where the psychology of an innocent child comes to rejoice at such a ritual.

Deeply symbolic, “The Lynching” transforms the daily fear of the Negro in America into the most unusual elegy, a sonnet, usually the domain of love. The poem works through contrasts, that between realism and symbolism, light and dark (“all night a bright and solitary star,” line 5), and even the juxtaposition of the poem itself, that of love elegy, with the basest of human crimes. McKay’s poem unlocks a world, through language. It is a quintessential poem, although methodic in its deployment of conventional tropes.

There is much poetic evidence that McKay, Royes, and others are not unique in their choice of themes, thereby being perfectly appropriate artifacts within the Black Atlantic. These artifacts – unnecessary human suffering, repeatable structural residues of a postcolonial set of realities – can be found both within the U.S. and in the Caribbean. In the poem “University of Hunger”¹⁶ Carter extols the “wide waste” that “is the university of hunger” (line 1). Similar to Royes’s rejection of poetry, Carter foregoes classical themes for “the print of hunger” (line 3) throughout his native Guyana: literal hunger, hunger for knowledge, hunger pointing to all that is human: “The plains of life rise up and fall in spasms” (line 5). Although Carter never mentions the genealogies that lead to the repeated long “march of men,” the “long [...] life” and “wide [...] span” which also closes the poem (lines 26–7, 36–7, 57–8), one might discern ancestors in the “green trees” that bend “above the long forgotten” (line 4), or in the “dark ones / the half sunken in the land” (lines 18–19).

These thumbnail sketches call for a bit more elaboration on what might make a poem *Black*, why the poems covered here belong to the Black Atlantic. The question of race is critical, given its persistence as a constructed reality with import and impact.

2 The Problem of Race

The category of the Black Atlantic gives a historical framework for the beginning of a modern phenomenon with impact across continents.¹⁷ In the early

15 Baldwin (1991), 229–52.

16 In Brown and McWatt (2009), 91–2.

17 Malcolmson (2000).

twenty-first century, as it pertains to Blackness, this phenomenon is being re-inscribed through DNA. An entire industry has grown up around the testing of heritage. An individual might determine that she is 80% African, bloodlines tied to sites of extraction during the Transatlantic Slave Trade: Ghana, Congo, the Ivory Coast, and other sites of the traffic of Black bodies from the 1500s until the British outlawed it in 1807 – and slavery and contraband trafficking of Africans and people of African descent continued well into the mid-to late-1800s. The advances that allow individuals in the twenty-first century to determine their bloodlines is a recent iteration of race, though it masks initially as ethnicity. The idea that there are races of humankind, historically mapped geographically, phenotypically, and even behaviorally, is certainly not new, and yet the inflection possible through DNA tests expands and, in some ways, reinforces extremely small and subtle human differences.

Bloodlines are not always visible, as the phenomenon of passing demonstrates, wherein Black people of extremely light complexion could disappear into white society in the United States during segregation. The poem “The Question of Identity” by Kristin (Hunter) Lattany (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 1931–Magnolia, New Jersey 2008) best conveys the winding roots that include the Black self:¹⁸

The Danes all told my husband, “Your French wife
Is charming,” and in slyer, suaver France,
[...]
The Question shimmered, shadowed. [...]
[...]
In London I was from Bombay; again
In Paris, I found I could not faze
By answering, “Je suis Americaine,”
Those who demanded, “Êtes-vous japonnaise?”
No matter what I said, they smiled. They knew.
“Vous êtes de Guadeloupe. Ou de Peru.”

lines 1–4, 7–12

Alternate bloodlines mask a racial identity the speaker insists on owning, albeit itself constructed and artificial: “Denying all their dim, exotic lands, / Repeating, firmly, clearly, ‘Je suis noire’” (lines 15–16). “I am black.” The reader gathers that the speaker is of mixed heritage, not easily identifiable racially or

18 In Rampersad (2006), 81.

ethnically. She carries complex bloodlines, for which in Italy “they asked me no more than they would the stars” (line 21):

I was nothing new beneath the sun
Where down the dark canals, past gilded doors,
Had glided Turks, Assyrians and Moors.

lines 22–4

Lattany closes the poem referring to a “martyrdom of living with a face / Whose only label was the human race” (lines 29–30).

In *Lines of Descent* (2014) – a study of the sociologist and activist W. E. B. Du Bois (Great Barrington, Massachusetts 1868–Accra, Ghana 1963) – Kwame Anthony Appiah, in his definition of race, presents “norms of treatment” as criteria that might dispose individuals to identify in particular ways. These norms of treatment thus lead to “norms of identification;”¹⁹ the individual *performs* from early on, and continues to perform, a racial identity. The cycle of internal and external forces, treatment, identification, and continued reification of a category, adds up to race. In the United States, the cycle finds its way through a historical chronology from Revolution, to slavery, segregation, and then the Black Arts response to the extension of civil rights in the late twentieth century. In the twenty-first century, norms of identification belie the range of topics about which a Black poet might write, but the harshness of social realities, for many, remains. Because of the numbers of nations represented, the Caribbean provides different particulars from the United States, and yet here again, the Black Atlantic triangle allows some transfer of knowledge across the Americas, for those interested in analysis.

In the United States, poetry in the hands of the African is present as early as the nation’s foundation. In 1773, the slave Phillis Wheatley (from today’s Gambia or Ghana, West Africa 1753–Boston, Massachusetts 1784) published her body of poetry in London, England. A letter written by her owner prefaced the publication, affirming that the slave herself had indeed written these poems, and that she was capable of reading Latin.²⁰ The book’s opening poem, “To Maecenas,” boldly imitated the famous opening poem of Horace’s *Odes*; and among her most significant poems would be “Niobe in Distress for Her Children Slain by Apollo, from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, Book vi, and from a view of the Painting of Mr. Richard Wilson.” Although in *Notes on the State of Virginia* Thomas Jefferson wrote that Wheatley’s poems were “below the

19 Appiah (2014), 149–51.

20 Barnard (2017).

dignity of criticism,” in their study on *African American Writers and Classical Tradition*, William Cook and James Tatum rebut the founding father with an analysis of Wheatley’s poems that show a knack for creativity and inspiration as well as craft, given her practice of revision.²¹

If Wheatley set the tone for Black poetry and Black letters, generally, in revolutionary and antebellum America, when Du Bois writes *The Souls of Black Folk* in 1903²² the social category of Negro was already well-inscribed, fully entangled with nationhood. The United States Supreme Court upheld legal segregation of the races in *Plessy v. Ferguson*, 1896; the Negro was a separate category, a separate being, from his white counterpart. Black people continued to grapple with this reality. In 1922 James Weldon Johnson (Jacksonville, Florida 1871–Wiscasset, Maine 1938) presents a collection of “Negro poets,”²³ which functions in a context that the philosopher Alain Locke (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 1885–New York City 1954) would name as the “New Negro”: this was the title of his 1925 anthology of poetry, essays, plays, music and portraiture that played a crucial role in canonizing what would be known as the Harlem Renaissance – “that dramatic upsurge of creativity in literature, music, and art within Black America that reached its zenith in the second half of the 1920s.”²⁴

Well into the 1920s through the 1940s, topical works such as McKay’s “The Lynching” (which was included in Johnson’s 1922 collection) present a reality that the majority culture did not memorialize; to some extent such a poem answers the question of the reaction that the genre of “poem” might have in the context of such a social category as “the Negro.” But both McKay and Cullen wrote during the period of the New Negro, and the modernist movement asked American writers of African descent to bring their folk perspectives to the project of modernity. Locke’s 1925 collection contained a number of approaches to Black arts and poetry, and Cullen’s might well embody the range,²⁵ from classically inflected poems like his later (1935) “Medusa” to poems like his 1934 “Scottsboro Too, Is Worth its Song (A poem to American

21 Cook and Tatum (2010), 7–47, where, in addition to “To Maecenas,” and “Niobe in Distress,” special attention is also paid to Wheatley’s poem “Goliath of Gath,” a Miltonic treatment of the David and Goliath story from the Bible, with parallels with the early West African epic *Sundiata*.

22 Du Bois (2008).

23 Johnson (2008).

24 A. Rampersad, “Introduction,” Locke (1992), ix.

25 Locke’s 1925 anthology included poems by both McKay and Cullen. In its initial edition, in 1922, Johnson’s collection included poems by McKay (among them “The Lynching”), but not by Cullen, whose first volume was published in 1925. Cullen was included in the 1931 revised edition of Johnson’s collection.

poets),”²⁶ that might fall more in the realistic category of McKay’s “Lynching.” By the late twentieth century, the New Negro evolves into a post-Civil Rights agent, and here, too, a range from Brooks’s classically inflected works, such as “The Anniad,” mentioned above, to the expressly political art of Amiri Baraka (Newark, New Jersey 1934–Newark, New Jersey 2014) would characterize the Black Arts Movement. Segregation and expression of “Negro humanity,” the coin of the New Negro entitlement to full rights as American citizens and frustration with the injustices that remain, would be reflected in the poetry of Africans in America after 1965.

Social circumstances shape art. (Here again are what Appiah called “norms of treatment,” “norms of identification”). To draw a parallel, Elie Wiesel (Sighet, Romania 1928–New York City 2016) forges *Night*, his memoir of his experience in the Nazi concentration camps, as one of the most poignant declarations of humanity, at its darkest moments, themselves moments of hope.²⁷ In a similar fashion, McKay’s “The Lynching” stares into the face of darkness. In the early twenty-first century, America is no longer a segregated society, at least in terms of laws (if not always in terms of social practice), and social categories such as “the Negro” no longer exist.

If interrogated, Du Bois himself would have to confess that his category of “race,” with its genealogy of multiple origins and destinations, bears as many similarities as it does differences from how race operates in the twenty-first century. His concept of the “soul of black folk” owed as much to the quasi-religious sense of a collective “spirit” as it did to social practices that amounted to – and still often amounts to – Black culture. Nevertheless, as individuals and groups still define themselves in terms of collective categories, such as “African” and “American,” or Black and African descent, art produced by those groups continue to bear the consistency of certain entanglements.²⁸ And yet, here again, one wonders if poetry in the hands of the African American is in some essential way different from other poetry.

3 The Crisis of the Black Poet

The challenge of the Black poet is to master poetic form *and* tell the truth of his or her experience. The fealty to local language, customs, foods, and culture, writ large, might in part serve to explain the rejection of classical form – Royce’s “I no long read poetry.”

26 See below, p. 131 n. 46.

27 Wiesel (2008).

28 Appiah (2018).

The allegiance that Royes expresses is evident across the Anglophone Black Atlantic in such poems as Louise Bennett's (Kingston, Jamaica 1919–Toronto, Canada 2006) "Dutty Tough,"²⁹ with its opening line ("sun a shine but tings no bright") negating classic elegy or lyric poetry ("sun a shine," i.e., the sun is shining), choosing instead the harsh realities of everyday life ("tings no bright," things are not good). At the same time, the poem also proudly asserts dialectic language, Jamaican creole or patois, as a beautiful, unstated solace.³⁰ The speaker refers to the "hard times" that "a beat we" (are defeating us) (line 10–11). These local realities are set against the colonial past. The repetition of the "poun," the British "pound" that was once the currency of Jamaica, makes the colonist the beginning of woes:

One poun gawn [gone] awn pon we pay, an
 We no feel no merriment
 For ten poun gawn awn pon we food
 An ten poun pon we rent!

lines 13–16

Money is gone, and the poet asserts a collective "we" as the ones who "feel no merriment." Money goes to food and rent but does not seem enough.

No place is the willfulness of the Caribbean poet – and an ambivalence toward the Classics, when it is present – more evident than in language. Dub is a recurrent poetic form, as one might recall that many of these authors are not the island scholarship recipients of Emily Greenwood's *Afro-Greeks*,³¹ but, rather, self-taught, vernacular poets. "dis [this] poem is a drum," as the performance poet and musician Mutabaruka (b. Kingston, Jamaica 1952) puts it.³² Rejection of classicism, however, does not mean unschooled. In his poem "The History of Dub Poetry,"³³ the dub and performance poet Mbala (b. Jamaica, 1953) asserts in Jamaican patois: "di sun it all aready / from flappin dadaist / to dub poet" (lines 1–3). This is an assertion (that everything under the sun has already been done) that name checks Dadaism, the avant-garde movement of the early twentieth century, rifling through the broader history of European and World art forms into which it fits. Mbala moves "from griot to / rockin

29 In Brown and McWatt (2009), 61–2.

30 It is worth mentioning that McKay's first books of poems *Songs of Jamaica* (1912) and *Constab Ballads* (1912) represent the first serious attempt in the Anglophone Caribbean to use patois as a vehicle for literature; see Brown and McWatt (2009), 368 and W.J. Maxwell, "Introduction," McKay (2004), xi–xliv.

31 Greenwood (2010).

32 In Brown and McWatt (2009), 278–80, "dis poem," line 42.

33 In Brown and McWatt (2009), 287–8.

minstrel rollin into court / [...] / dancehallin towards yu conscience" (lines 6–7, 10). The flow of Mbala's poem, like Mutabaruka's "dis poem," is constant movement, as if itself a dance, in this case, through history: "ova centries / di rapso man / calypso man" (lines 18–20). The "rapso man" is the rhapsodist of Platonic critique, as the calypso man might have been, had Plato known him. The poet is "burnin thru / slang and syntax / thru di dub" (lines 26–28). The insistence of the poem is its *clarity* of language and intent: language of its own, consciously rejecting precedent and models, intent upon its own form, expression, and culture. The poet is aware of other forms – Dadaism, but also the rhapsodist of Greek epic – but chooses something else.

Returning to the United States, Cornelius Eady (b. Rochester, New York 1954) encapsulates Black poetry as a dilemma, in "Why Do So Few Blacks Study Creative Writing?" (from *The Gathering of My Name*, 1991).³⁴ The "sweet hurt" that comes in the answer to the poem's titular question is felt from the very first line of the poem. The writer sets up the poem as a story of a teacher in a classroom. When the teacher encounters a Black, female student, the titular question is prompted, and the answer is dispiriting. A sweet hurt settles "in the eyes" (line 2).

The writer comes to "the end of class" (line 3) in the first stanza. His role as the teacher is clarified in the second stanza, when he "stand[s] face to face with your / Younger face" (lines 6–7). The use of third and second person is canny, as "your younger face" draws the reader into intimacy. That this sweet hurt is recurrent is also clear by the end of the second stanza. It is "always the same" (line 1) even if the question comes from "a young woman, this time" (line 8). The simple repetitions – "always the same," "there / will always be the moment" (lines 1 and 29–30), "sooner or later" (lines 3 and 5) – alongside the poem's female subject of interest might not be an allusion to Sappho per se, but the parallel is significant. The repetition of "again" in Sappho's Fragment 1³⁵ – *deute* [δηϋτε] in the Greek – speaks of the repeated loss of love that comes with erotic desire, a parallel to the "always the same" in Eady, of unrequited desire for affirmation that is concomitant with Black identity. In Sappho's case, the loss is that of love, again. In Eady's poem, the sweet hurt develops from another cause: constant rejection, unyielding necessity to prove oneself. Similar to the universality of love that might link a poet like Sappho to Eady across time, the universality of "all music / begins equal" (lines 11–12) in the third stanza of "Why Do So Few Blacks Study Creative Writing?" contrasts with the loneliness, the unique nature, of the cause of the sweet hurt in Eady's poem. Here the

34 In Rampersad (2006), 6.

35 The hymn to Aphrodite, see Lombardo (2002), xiv–xv.

cause is not unrequited romantic love but rather the rejection that comes with the racial identity of Blackness.

In Eady's poem the (Black female) student's poem needs "a passport, a glossary" (line 13) – a truth equally clear in the poems of Bennett, Mutabaruka, and Mbala. Race feels particular because it is foreign, even unwelcome, to the craft of poetry. It needs to be noticed (and noted) before it can speak to others. "There are worlds, and there are worlds" (line 17); but the student wants to know, "*What's wrong with me?*" (line 19). Her poem needs "photosynthesis / To break it down to an organic language" (line 21–2). Here again some readers might hear Sappho Fragment 31,³⁶ the triangulation of desire, where the language of botany also conveys the emotional pallor of seeing one's lover with another. Sappho's line, parallel to the photosynthesis to break down the Black poem, is as follows: "I tremble all over, turn paler than grass." Poetry in the hands of an African American is a complex, scientific process, one that requires explanation – natural, and yet unseen, unexpected, and calling for expertise and delicate treatment.

Eady's poem ends with a stanza that distills the struggle to express a particular identity through universal language:

[...] Really, what
Can I say? That if she chooses
To remain here the term
Neighborhood will always have
A foreign stress. [...]

lines 25–9

The focus on language – the need for a passport, for a glossary – remains here in the emphasis on the word "neighborhood" and its "foreign stress." One need not travel far in the United States to require special terms of entry, codes, and differential language. In most institutions of higher education in the United States, Blacks constitute well under 10% of the population although approximately 14% of the broader population. Even fewer might study poetry and aspire to be poets. The difference, the distance, is race. The difference, the distance, is the answer to the poem's titular question: "Why do so few blacks study creative writing?"

Eady's poem echoes the realism of many earlier works from the United States, from the New Negro to the Black Arts Movement. In those works, racial identity is not a barrier to poetic expression, as it threatens to be in "Why Do

36 Or Fragment 20 in Lombardo (2002).

So Few Blacks Study Creative Writing?," although the writer ultimately breaks through (as does Royce). For Eady, racial identity is the premise to many a poetical turn, including the celebration and shared identity around culture and bloodlines.

Langston Hughes (Joplin, Missouri 1902–New York 1967) had also been compelled to call out that "I, too, Sing America," and to ask whether "a dream deferred" dries up "like a raisin in the sun" or explodes (in "Harlem").³⁷ As is clear from all perspectives, poetry has the power to transform, to shift perspectives. For Hughes, racial identity is ultimately a positive identification. Hughes's "My People" declares this, in a dualism that will be shown to be part of a consistent thematization among Black poets:³⁸

The night is beautiful,
So the faces of my people.

The stars are beautiful,
So the eyes of my people.

Beautiful, also, is the sun.
Beautiful, also, are the souls of my people.

Making night beautiful inverts the fear of darkness that we might also trace back to classical expression. Sappho also positively frames night as a time for the individual, soulful reflection that the poet must cultivate.³⁹ "Night is beautiful," and night no doubt parallels the mahogany of faces of people of African descent. The white of eyes shine on Black faces, like the stars, which are also beautiful. But the brightness of the sun, often attributed to the geography of race – Aethiops as "burnt skin" in classical times – is also beautiful. The repetition of beautiful is incantatory. Repeated as the last word of the first line of each of the two initial stanzas, it returns to initiate each of the two lines of the closing stanza: "[...] beautiful [...] beautiful [...] Beautiful [...] Beautiful [...]." For each stanza, the closing "my people" asserts connection between beauty, the poet, and people, that is itself new in Western poetry: My Black people are beautiful. Hughes anticipates the phrase, "Black is beautiful" later in the century, which becomes a mantra during the Black Arts Movement.

37 In *The Weary Blues* (1926) and *Montage of a Dream Deferred* (1951) respectively.

38 In Rampersad (2006), 74.

39 Lombardo (2002).

The crisis of Black poetry will influence how writers of African descent use the Classics. Constance Quarterman Bridges in *Lions Don't Eat Us* (2006) presents race itself as a Gordian knot,⁴⁰ where the Southern slave-holder creates of blood ties inextricable webs:

*"Great-Grandfather Fray was a white man.
He went to another Virginia county to get
Grandpa Albert (his own mixed son) a wife.
He wanted a dark-skin woman because
Grandpa looked white." Aunt Edna*

[...]

He wanted to untie the weave
of the Gordian Knot, complicated
tangle he had created, with the issue
of silk-haired Albert, his son,
too fair to hide among the varied blacks.

[...]

epigraph; lines 10–14

The Gordian Knot recalls Appiah's norms of identification and norms of treatment, and also his notion of race as entanglement. The crisis of race is that there is no way out, only through, if there is to be a "we," an "us." And yet, "we" continue to divide ourselves by tribe.

4 Black Poetry and the Classics

The foregoing analysis serves to frame some of the ways that a reader might come into the relationship between Black poets and the Classics, an interplay rife with tension and ambiguity, laden with history and collective pulls on an individual artist. Writers to varying degrees recognize their heritage as descendants of slaves, inheritors of a legacy of segregation, and observers of a culture that exhibits the residue of this history. They might acknowledge this outright in their poetry, as Haki Madhubuti (b. Little Rock, Arkansas 1942) does, or they might play with the identity, as Carl Phillips (b. Everett, Washington 1959). In many cases, social circumstances might dominate the images and tropes in the poem, as is the case with Danez Smith (b. St. Paul, Minnesota 1959). Or, here

40 "Albert's Story, Part 1: 'Gordian Knot,'" in Rampersad (2006), 60.

again, the writer might not at all allude to his or her race. Elizabeth Alexander (b. Harlem, New York 1962) is not *necessarily* or explicitly a Black poet, any more than is Rita Dove (b. Akron, Ohio 1952). And yet, entanglements and embodiment reinforce heritage. Whereas the knots of entanglements should be clear from the foregoing, embodiment is a difficult concept to convey in a poem. Whatever Alexander or Dove do or do not do, a reader imports his or her own notions of Blackness into their reading, as soon as the image of these women strikes their consciousness.

As it pertains to the Classics, it is worth stopping, en route to the more distant past, at Dante Alighieri, a major, recurrent inspiration to many Black writers.⁴¹ Among the many reasons for Dante's primacy are, first, his proximity, as opposed to the classical poets, who might perhaps feel to some to be more removed in time. Dante also captures the sheer power of poetry, on the cusp of modernity, to conjure up worlds, as Cornelius Eady sees in the poem "Paradiso,"⁴² in *Don't Miss Your Water* (1995), a prose-poem cycle of elegies for his father.

4.1 Eady's "Paradiso"

A world that Dante conjures, alongside the Roman prism through which Virgil is able to lead him, is one of spirits; and the spirit life, or a spiritual realm, drives a number of Black poets. In "Paradiso" Eady blends the world of the classical, albeit channeled through Dante, and that of the Black church: the poet thinks of "his father fired to dust in a plain urn and all the answers I'd learned in church, how all the lost must rise, commuters home at last, from wherever fate has ditched them, with their dishonored ropes and blown equipment." It will be worth returning to the conjuring of spirits at the end of the essay, because it is a recurrent theme in Black poetry and the Classics, which might be discussed in classical terms as a *nekuia*, similar to Odysseus' conjuring of spirits in the *Odyssey*.⁴³ For now, the analysis of "Paradiso" transports the reader, more broadly, through its conjuration of language itself.

Eady uses this Pauline idea that the dead will all rise (1 *Corinthians* 15: 42, 51 and 52) to consider an after-dinner talk given in Italy by a scholar "on her study of Dante and the many questions left unanswered about the afterlife." Eady goes through a number of thoughts and memories, such as whether the "glorified body" of his dead father, upon rising, at some point in the future, will be "the one I'd grown up with," or "the young boy I'll never know [...]" who

41 See Looney (2011).

42 In Rampersad (2006), 351.

43 See below, p. 135.

wanders off for a month at a time.” One wonders which body is resurrected, and whether it is a racial body. The poem prompts the question of the extent to which race is embodied, or whether it is contained in acts, even if embodied. Still, the body could be the “shape of the man” that visited Eady’s mother after his father’s funeral, “appearing just to help [her] close this file on their lives.” These speculations about celestial bodies – and the focus on them – highlight the weight of embodiment to the Black poet.

Whatever the case, poetry gives Eady an answer to the scholar’s question about Dante: “*How can this be done?*” How can the dead rise, especially when it comes to the dismembered bodies in Dante’s purgatory? As the scholar “places our hands in Dante’s,” through the very question, Eady realizes that “the key to any heaven is language.” That is, language holds the power to unlock mysteries, to imagine worlds, and to conjure – souls, memories, and even wayward thoughts. Although Virgil is not embodied in Eady’s poem, he exists as himself a ghost, the one in whose hands Dante placed his, even as the scholar, through Eady, places our hands in Dante’s. Poetry is itself the conjurer and the poet its (the poem’s) hands, its instrument.

In terms of an analysis of a poem alluding to Dante, as with the genre of poetry itself, the idea of the “classic” frames a very broad conversation regarding influence and allusion. As it pertains specifically to Graeco-Roman myth and literature, the engagement of Black poets has been as wide-ranging as has been shown across the broader classical form of poetry itself. Inverting the relationship between reality and symbolism found in McKay’s “The Lynching,” Cullen’s “Medusa,” for example, written during the New Negro period, does not announce its racial or social interest in its title. Whereas “The Lynching” was seeped in symbolism and almost needs the title to anchor its references in twentieth-century African American concerns, “Medusa” chooses to anchor its reality on ancient, mythological ground. Nevertheless, social reality is not too far behind. As will also be the case with “Pasiphae” (see below), Cullen’s poem shifts perspectives, deploying Greek myth to broaden the field on which symbols play. To press interpretation would be to find race on that field.

4.2 Cullen’s “Medusa”

Similar to “The Lynching,” Cullen’s “Medusa” from the collection *The Medea and Some Poems* is a sonnet from the New Negro era.⁴⁴ The male gaze – “I mind me how when I first looked at her” in the first line of iambs – upon a woman, Medusa, is closer to the customary interest of the poet of the sonnet. At the same time, the expectation of Medusa as object of the gaze is already queer.

44 The rhyme-scheme of the sonnet is *ab[a]b cdcd efefgg*.

The shift from the “look[ing]” in the first line to the “warning shudder” of the second line is immediate: “A warning shudder in the blood cried, ‘Ware!’” Cullen now draws from the common font of images associated with Medusa: “Those eyes are basilisk’s she gazes through, / And those are snakes you take for strands of hair!” (lines 3–4). Cullen also sets his reader up for the undoing that will occur later in the poem. That is, the fear expressed in the warning shudder and the “blood” cry of “Ware!” is a matter of perspective, not necessarily reality.

Notwithstanding the fear that runs through his blood, the speaker was “never one to be subdued / By any fear of aught not reason-bred” (lines 5–6), the reader learns at the beginning of the second stanza. The modernist exists in a world of reason. Driven by reason, the speaker “mocked the ruddy word” (line 7) and shows bravery in turning his gaze “to meet the gold-envenomed dart” (line 8) of Medusa’s gaze. But the male gaze is ultimately mocked, as power rests in Medusa, not in the brave, masculine rapture customary in classical lyric. In the first line of the third and culminating stanza we hear the speaker’s cry: “O vengeful warning, spiteful stream, a truce!” (line 9). The shift is also a pact between the poet and the reader. Medusa’s gaze *must*, by necessity of mythological orthodoxy, blind. But what sort of blindness is this? The poet seems to have been blinded by the very expectations established in the myth. He now, at the close of the poem, says: “I know it was a lovely face I braved” (line 14). What haunts, in the end, is not Medusa, but rather:

[...] this constant crying in the wind,
This ultimate indignity: abuse
Heaped on a tree of all its foliage thinned?

lines 11–12

The last line cannot but call to mind the lynched body, the “indignity” of race in America and its ramifications.

Cullen’s “Medusa” performs a bait-and-switch with its reader. The truce between poet and audience does result in all that is expected, but the fault, in the end, lies in the gaze of the onlooker, not with Medusa. At the end of the poem, Cullen restores Medusa to the status of the appropriate object for a sonnet, a lovely face. Throwing scrutiny back on the audience, readers must now grapple with their own expectations. Medusa is simultaneously restored and removed from difficulty. Where the mystery remains is in the “constant crying in the wind.” Knowing that Medusa is part of the volume that features Cullen’s adaptation of *Medea*, in which the title character, who was meant to be Black,⁴⁵

45 Rankine (2006), 93–103.

is restored from the status of perpetrator in her children's murder to that of victim, one wonders about the racial status of "Medusa." Is the title character an African American subject?⁴⁶ If so, is Cullen's reparation of an appropriate view of Medusa, in fact, a celebration of Black womanhood, wherein he reveals the indignity of mistreatment and abuse from slavery through the twentieth century and even to today? Or, alternatively, is Cullen drawing his reader into a trap, wherein *their* love interest in the perhaps-Black, female subject prompts interrogation into *their* commitment to a liberating cause, that of stopping the "abuse / Heaped on a tree of all its foliage thinned?" Whatever the case, Cullen's commitment to the classical form is both undeniable, artful, and useful.

4.3 Hayden's "O Daedalus Fly Away Home"

Robert Hayden's (Detroit, Michigan 1913–Ann Arbor, Michigan 1980) "O Daedalus Fly Away Home" (1943)⁴⁷ is an emblematic instance of the joining of Black-oriented, social and cultural realities with classical tropes. This allegiance gains Hayden some scorn among writers of the Black Arts Movement.⁴⁸ The by-now-universal symbol of Daedalus, the Cretan workman who crafts his own flight and that of his son, Icarus, from the island, when his labyrinth has proven fatal, is a symbol of flight from, and to, a certain freedom for Africans in America. Immediately noting the retentions emblematic of enslaved Africans in the American South, and through various repetitions, Hayden blends the "Drifting scent of the Georgia pines, / coonskin drum and jubilee banjo" (lines 1–2).⁴⁹ In the second stanza, the speaker names the congo, along with

46 *The Medea and Some Poems* also includes the poem "Scottsboro Too, Is Worth its Song" (for which see above, pp. 121–2), referring to "The Scottsboro Boys," nine Black youths who in 1931 were falsely accused of raping two young white women. After a tense trial in Scottsboro, one of the Black youths was sentenced to life imprisonment, the other eight to the electric chair. Retrials of "The Scottsboro boys" followed. The cases also included a lynch mob. See Miller (2009). The figure of Medusa is also connected with rape. In *Metamorphoses* (Book iv), Ovid reports the rape of the maiden Medusa by the God Neptune (the Greek God Poseidon), before she was transformed into a snake-headed Gorgon. It is also worth mentioning *Medusa* by Dorothea Smartt, a one-woman performance presented at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, in 1993. In a 1995 interview, Smartt explained: "I thought to myself: Medusa was probably some black woman with nappy hair, and some white man saw her and cried: a monster!, and feared her, and so told stories about her dangerous potential," in Goodman (2003), 274.

47 In Rampersad (2006), 15.

48 See Smith (2018), 18–39 (chapter "Quarreling in the Movement: Rethinking Hayden and the Black Arts Era").

49 The state of Georgia, in the southeastern region of the United States, was named after King George II of Great Britain, but the name might also bring to mind Virgil's *Georgics* and its etymological connection with soil and farming.

the juba dance that mixes African Spiritism with ecstatic, Christian expression. Like banjo (in line 2), the presence of the congo is evidence of syncretism: "Night is juba, night is congo" (line 4). Hayden's powerful metaphor continues in the third stanza: now "Night is an African juju man" (line 6), or, as we will read a few lines afterwards, "Night is a mourning juju man" (line 19). The reader discovers that Daedalus' flight is more spiritual than physical: the music and dance transport the celebrants from Georgia to West Africa by "weaving a wish and a weariness together / to make two wings" (lines 7–8 and 20–1). The contrasting twin wings of weariness and a wish are the metaphorical flight from Georgia to Africa. The enchanted narrator asks the audience: "Do you remember Africa?" (line 10); and adds: "I knew all the stars of Africa" (line 12); "My gran, he flew back to Africa, / just spread his arms and flew away home ..." (line 14–15). The incantations that transport – "*O fly away home, fly away*" (lines 9 and 22); "*O cleave the air, fly away home*" (line 11); "*Spread my wings and cleave the air*" (line 13) – recall a later, spiritual expression of metaphoric flight, that of Bob Marley's (Nine Mile, Jamaica 1945–Miami, Florida 1981) "Rastaman Chant": "Fly away home to Zion [...] Fly away home." Marley's promise that "one bright morning when my work is over" he will fly away home echoes the weariness – of enslavement, of work, of struggle – of one of the twin wings in Hayden's poem. The other wing is the hope of human imagination, through poetry.

Hayden's poem echoes the myth of the "flying Africans" that Toni Morrison's (b. Lorain, Ohio 1931–New York City 2019) novel *Song of Solomon* (1977) would make popular.⁵⁰ Morrison herself fought off the imposition of the Icarus myth onto her telling of a folkloric tale of the African's flight back home from America, whether real or imagined. It is telling that the named traveler in Hayden's poem is Daedalus, not Icarus. Daedalus is the craftsman, the dreamer who fashions the flight, whether or not it succeeds. Similar to Eady's celebration of language itself, Hayden demonstrates the power of poetry – music, incantation – to craft worlds, indeed the same poetry through which the African imagines their freedom flight.

4.4 Kocher's "Response to Pasiphae"

In "Response to Pasiphae" (2006), Ruth Ellen Kocher (b. Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania 1965) takes the story of Pasiphae and her desire into the contemporary city.⁵¹ In the classical myth, a passionate desire for the bull, child of Poseidon, himself symbolic of the wild, unpredictable nature of the sea,

50 Rankine (2006), 117–18. The Georgian variant of the "Flying Africans" is connected with the Igbo Landing.

51 In Derricotte and Eady (2006), 114.

overtakes Pasiphae, daughter of Helios (the Sun) and wife of Minos, the King of Crete. Diverging from norms, she copulates with the bull. Their offspring is the Minotaur, a creature with a human body and a bull's head, for whom Daedalus crafts the labyrinth. Until Theseus slays the beast, the presence of the Minotaur, temporarily contained within a man-made structure, threatens to disrupt the norms of civilized, human life.

The "Response" in Kocher's title announces an unprecedented perspective, since the focus of the story tends not to be on the young woman. Rather, the story of Theseus and the Minotaur often takes center stage. Thanks to Euripides' *Hippolytus*, moreover, Pasiphae's daughter (with Minos), Phaedra, has her place in the legacy. As with Pasiphae, a passionate desire for a forbidden love overtakes Phaedra. In this case, the love is for Hippolytus, the son of her new husband, Theseus, who slew the Minotaur. The unrequited love leads to Phaedra's suicide and Hippolytus' demise.

In Kocher's poem, Pasiphae now becomes the focal point. The "alleyways / the bus rides into the city" (lines 5–6) that open the second stanza signal the modern, urban contextualization of the mythic figure in the title. The first word of the poem has already established the relationship between the speaker and the titular subject:

Cousin, know about the white bull,
how your love for this creature
seized you,
your body captured.

lines 1–4

Thus far, the clearest new perspective is that of the familial relationship, the speaker as "cousin" to Pasiphae. The "white bull," however, hints at another aspect of the new perspective: whiteness as hot whiteness, perhaps, as race. Desire remains. Pasiphae's "love for this creature" seizes her. Pasiphae's body is "captured." The passive voice punctuates Pasiphae's position and encloses the stanza, as Pasiphae is bounded in a triangle that now encloses the speaker: "Cousin [...] creature [...] captured."

In the second stanza, we see that for the modern Pasiphae, normalcy will not do, any more than it did for the classical figure. "The cocks of men" (line 6) do not entice her. Picking up on the "white bull" of the first line, the second stanza closes with some revelation regarding the modern beast's identity: "Did you finally / take him – cut thin lines, razored rows" (lines 7–8). The phrase – "cut lines, razored rows" – is itself cut, and an enjambment is required, into the third stanza, where the reader sees these lines and rows "plowed with a sippee

straw cut in two" (line 9). The speaker asks if this is the way that Pasiphae took in the white bull, "or did it begin – veins opened to the burden?" (line 10). The reader now realizes that Pasiphae is a person under the sway of a powerful monster, the "white bull" cocaine. As she takes in the drug, Pasiphae herself becomes "the beast in this story, mother / whose monster lives in my home" (lines 11–12).

Kocher's use of poetic conventions – alliteration, word placement and enjambment, the stanza – is remarkable. She frames the named triad of mother, child, and father – recalling the mythical triad of Pasiphae, the Minotaur, and the bull – in the third, fourth, and fifth stanzas (of seven). In the third stanza, the reader learns that Pasiphae is the "mother" (line 11) of the white bull. At the beginning of the fourth stanza, the drug makes her behave like the "child in Taurus" (line 13) – a masterly allusion to the myth, through the Greek word for "bull," "Taurus," and the constellation of that name. That Pasiphae "spit[s] / her bad luck into" the speaker's face (line 15) could be the actual behavior of a junkie, or it could be taken metaphorically of the results of drug addiction, the "bad luck" that visits Pasiphae's family because of the white bull. Closing the triad in the fifth stanza, the "father" is present, repeated twice as the beastly option of cocaine or heroin, passively taken in by the user, Pasiphae:

Fathered by curses and left.
 Fathered by a white desire,
 vials, by a quarter-T,
 a lighter, needle, spoon.

lines 16–19

Kocher emphasizes addiction in her repetition of the perspective that, by taking in the white bull, Pasiphae herself becomes the beast: "But she – the bull, also," as we read at the beginning of the sixth stanza (line 20). The cousin becomes a new element to the classical tale, a caretaker who sees all and knows Pasiphae intimately, in a way that lets the reader into an unprecedented proximity: "Tonight, she will collapse in my lap" (line 22).

The poem closes with a third iteration of Pasiphae's own transformation into the white bull, "her small feet / hooved against earth" (line 24–5). The final image of Pasiphae's "incarcerated heart" (line 27) merges a reality of existence for many Black Americans with a metaphor of sleep, which should be liberating but is imprisonment because it results from this awful addiction. These modern images – cities, drugs, and incarceration – move Kocher's myth of Pasiphae into a new framework. Certainly, there are many Black experiences, but cities,

drugs, and alarming and unjustified rates of incarceration are among the late-twentieth- early-twenty-first-century realities that matter for Black lives.⁵²

4.5 *Odysseys and the Afterlife*

From the preceding analysis, it is clear that the framework of Black poetry introduces new stories, new odysseys into the verses. The term “odyssey” itself can indeed more directly refer to the eponymous hero of Homeric epic, but the explorations of Black life in the Americas push the form to new terrain. Odysseus, too, faced misadventures, and Black poets, as has been seen, inscribe into their phrasing experiences that range from lynching, to incarceration, to various iterations of simply being misread. In terms of identity, these “Black” experiences link past and present, so that “norms of identification” emerge, to use again Appiah’s terms. Comparisons across individual experiences result in “norms of treatment.” All add up to the realities of race. At the same time, poetry is the place for the process of crafting art out of life, of making the best even of a bad situation, and imagining better. There is a blues sensibility to Black poetry; the Black poet and the jazz musician, spiritual and blues singers, are cousins, like Kocher to Pasiphae.

Odysseys in Black move from the varied experience of Black life, to transforming the darkness of death into a connection to past generations and norms of identification. A recurring theme in poetry across the Black Atlantic is in fact the odyssey and, in particular, the conjuring of the dead, the *nekuia*, which has already been seen in “Paradiso.”

Dove’s “Nigger Song: An Odyssey,” from her book *The Yellow House on the Corner* (1980),⁵³ approaches the realism of Brooks. The associations of Blackness – engine oil, night, and graveyards – amount to boldness on the part of the six travelers, who “pile in” and “ride into the night / [...] / ride / Into the gray-green nigger night” (lines 1–2, 4–5). Black, green, and gray paint the night as the riders are “veering / into the black entrails of the earth” (lines 9–10). Masterful with language and its power to evoke images, Dove conveys the joy of riding into the “nigger night,” where culture – the night, “thick with the smell of cabbages,” affords the riders the feeling of freedom: “Nothing can catch us” (lines 12–13). This odyssey needs no Odysseus, no individual hero. Rather, culture, with its collective heroes, teems with “laughter” that “spills like gin from glasses” (line 14). The joy, adventure, and conquest of the proverbial hero is felt

52 M. Alexander (2010).

53 In Rampersad (2006), 65.

in the poem's final celebration, which again is conveyed in simple yet powerful language: "And 'yeah' we whisper, 'yeah' / We croon, yeah" (lines 15–16).

Not unique to Dove is the descent into darkness – the *nekuia*, whether the conjuring of ghosts from the past, as in *Odyssey* 11, or the *katabasis* itself, the descent into the underworld, into "nigger night." Readers of Walcott's *Omeros* will recall the dreamlike scene in which Achille encounters his father, his ancestor, Afolabe, in a seascape that recalls the Middle Passage from Africa to the New World. The *nekuia* is one of the motifs that obtains across the Black Atlantic. It is also present in Anthony McNeill's (Kingston, Jamaica 1941–West Indies 1996) "The Kingdom of Myth – A Fable in 32 Lines."⁵⁴ The "cold / Jungle or Tivoli don" (lines 2–3), the drug-dealer of these Kingston neighborhoods, is not quite the *aristos* of Greek epic poetry, but he does hold powerful sway over the youth, whom he leaves "dead – / from the waist down; / left the youth dread – / from waist up" (lines 4–7). The reference to the "ghost of Paul Newman" (line 13), the hero of Westerns, prefaces a thematic return, when the youth

[...] flex[es] with his Bible

in search of a key

unlocking
Red City;
built skull on skull,

in the image of Hell.

lines 17–22

In a reverse of the *nekuia*, this youth does not return from Hell, but chooses to remain. Like a lost Eurydice, he "turn[s] / and stay[s] / one with the fallen" (lines 23–5). Hell is safer, more desirable, than Kingston.

Although there is not properly a *nekuia* in "Coolie Odyssey," the programmatic poem of the Oxbridge educated David Dabydeen's (b. Berbice, Guyana 1955) collection *Coolie Odyssey* (1988), the poet writes an odyssey for the everyman of the Caribbean, and the poem hovers around death. Since "now [...] peasantry is in vogue / [...] / It should be time to hymn your own wreck" (lines 1 and 6). This epic, like Walcott's, has all the cultural markers of its local environment:

54 In Brown and McWatt (2009), 187.

Your house the source of ancient song:
 Dry coconut shells cackling in the fireside
 Smoking up our children's eyes and lungs,
 Plantains spitting oil from a clay pot,
 Thick sugary black tea gulped down.

lines 7–11

Old Dabydeen, the everyday hero of this epic, “drank rum / till he dropped dead” (lines 75–6). The “Coolie Odyssey” is preoccupied with death. It tracks the funeral of Old Dabydeen and his wife. The narrator could be read as tracking the history of Guyana, when “at first the gleam of the green land and the white folk and the Negroes, / the earth streaked with colour like a toucan’s beak” (lines 100–1). The “canefields ripening in the sun” (lines 103) reverberates in the sugary black tea from earlier in the poem. The narrator has “come back late and missed the funeral” (lines 105), recalling not only the death of Old Dabydeen, but also countless who came before. Whereas the *nekuia* calls back spirits through blood, folk song tells a tale that negates the efficacy of *katabasis*:

Is foolishness fill your head.
Me dead.
Dog-bone and dry-well
Got no story to tell.

lines 117–20

Such a rhyme is what “mark[s] your memory in songs / Fleshed in the emptiness of folk” (lines 142–3). This poem, this odyssey, “scrape[s] bowl and bone / In English basements far from home” (lines 144–5). In the shadow of Old Dabydeen’s odyssey is the poet Dabydeen’s journey, one that echoes the classic Caribbean story, the cosmopolitan tale that Walcott himself tells.

4.6 *The Art of Poetry and the Power of Language*

Elizabeth Alexander’s “Ars Poetica #100: I Believe” is a good place to end this brief survey because of its assertion of a theory of poetry.⁵⁵ To some readers, the claim of a theory evokes Horace’s *Ars Poetica*, which itself engages with ancient attempts at theorizing about writing, such as Aristotle’s *Poetics*. From the title, Alexander anchors her verses in the principles that capture the audience. Whereas Horace asserts the importance of form – the verse, theme,

55 Alexander’s “Ars Poetica” series is worth study. See, for example, E. Alexander (2004).

character – Alexander asserts from the beginning: “Poetry, I tell my students, / is idiosyncratic” (lines 1–2), that is, poetry is succumbing, in the end, to no set rules, as a rule. Similar to Aristotle, Horace makes reference to the greatest poet, Homer. For Alexander, the exemplum is not Homer, but rather Sterling Brown:

[...] Poetry
Is where we are ourselves
(though Sterling Brown said
“Every ‘I’ is a dramatic ‘I’”)
lines 2–5

The reference to Sterling Allen Brown (Washington, DC, 1901–Takoma Park, Maryland 1989) is marked racially, though parenthetically. Brown is the magister, in place of Homer, the Howard University professor and D. C. Poet Laureate in 1984, who taught Toni Morrison, Amiri Baraka, and even Alexander, that “every ‘I’ is a dramatic ‘I.’” This dramatic “I” is the character in action of Aristotelian poetics. Even more importantly, the dramatic “I” points to the performative nature of identity. For the Black poet, performing the “I” inevitably means encountering race.

To this “I,” Alexander gives permission, like Brown, Morrison, and Baraka before her, to jump *in medias res* and perform her, his, or their idiosyncratic reality. Allowance that poetry “is not all love, love, love” (line 15 of Alexander’s poem) enabled McKay to make of lynching a sonnet. The everyday themes of traditional sonnets are rendered banal, and poetry is not “I’m sorry the dog died” (line 16) either. Poetry is, rather, “what you find / in the dirt in the corner” (lines 9–10) and what you “overhear on the bus” (lines 11). In this inversion, the sublime – e.g., love – is rendered banal, and the banal – dirt in the corner, what you hear on the bus – sublime. It is the person addicted to crack cocaine in the United States in the 1980s, now Pasiphae, who travels down back alleys. Although Royce no longer read poetry, this is poetry of a different order.

“Poetry [...] / is the human voice” (lines 17–18) Alexander asserts. Her hope, it seems, is that as people live together, we would hear in each other the human voice, not a racial identity, itself a dangerous construction. For Alexander, we should be “of interest to each other” (line 19), as partakers in a common humanity. For many Black poets, the Classics were a way to translate their human voice, to perform their dramatic “I,” in unexpected, creative ways that capture the attention of their readers. It is also a way to challenge *status quo* and to question expectations, through language. It is, thirdly, sometimes a marker, to others, of a transgression, such as is evident in the reception that

Hayden received among some of his peers.⁵⁶ At the same time, the Classics in the hands of Black writers is not a blunt instrument; it has many valances and uses.⁵⁷ If Medusa is not who we thought she was, one wonders what other misperceptions rule our lives. Through their poetic art, Black poets challenge our classics and in doing so, help to shift our perspectives.

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⁵⁶ See above, p. 131.

⁵⁷ See Barnard (2017).

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“A Group of Ardent Hellenists”

The Imagists, Greek Meter, and Making It New

Elizabeth Vandiver

Mr. Richard Aldington is a young English poet, one of the “Imagistes,” a group of ardent Hellenists who are pursuing interesting experiments in *vers libre*; trying to attain in English certain subtleties of cadence of the kind which Mallarmé and his followers have studied in French.



So reads the biographical note appended in 1912 to the first poems ever printed under the rubric of “Imagism”: Richard Aldington’s “ΧΟΡΙΚΟΣ” (later reprinted as “Choricos”), “To a Greek Marble,” and “Au Vieux Jardin.”¹ Almost every word of this description of Imagism would soon be vehemently contested. Aldington (1892–1962) later wrote that there was no actual “group” of Imagists in 1912;² Ezra Pound (1885–1972) declared that Imagism had nothing

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- 1 Aldington (1912). The anonymous biographical note appears on p. 65. Starting with Flint (1915), T. E. Hulme is frequently named as the founder of “Imagism.” However, Hulme never used the term himself. The first recorded use of the term “Imagiste” is Ezra Pound’s, in his “Prefatory Note” to his 1912 printing of Hulme’s poems. Pound ((1912b), 59) refers both to a possible “School of Images” and to “Les Imagistes”: “As for the ‘School of Images,’ which may or may not have existed, its principles were not so interesting as those of the ‘inherent dynamists’ [...] As for the future, *Les Imagistes*, the descendants of the forgotten school of 1909, have that in their keeping.” This is typically cryptic, but Pound does not directly say that Hulme’s own poems were Imagist. Flint ((1915), 70) admits that Pound coined the term but nevertheless says that Hulme’s “Autumn” was “one of the first ‘Imagist’ poems.” Versions of this paper were presented at the Cambridge University Classical Reception Seminar Series, May 2018, and the St. Anne’s Classics Society, University of Oxford, June 2018. I am very grateful to the audiences at both universities for their lively discussion and helpful suggestions.
 - 2 Referring to the famous meeting of Pound, H. D., and Aldington in a Kensington tea shop, Aldington ((1941), 134–5) writes: “H. D. produced some poems which I thought excellent, and she either handed or mailed them to Ezra. [...] Ezra was so much worked up by these poems of H. D.’s that he removed his pince-nez and informed us that we were Imagists. [...] My own

to do with Hellenism or *vers libre*;³ there was no agreement on what “cadence,” subtle or otherwise, meant; the relationship between English free verse and French *vers libre* was far from simple. Even the spelling “Imagiste” was quickly discarded. Nevertheless, the note in *Poetry*’s second issue points us towards a crucial element in the earliest development of Imagism. Despite Pound’s disavowal, classical texts and cultures were profoundly important for the original Imagists’ theories about poetry and for their own poetic practice.

Scholarship on Pound acknowledges the complexity of his interactions with classical works throughout his *oeuvre*, and of course the *Homage to Sextus Propertius* alone continues to generate heated critical discussion.⁴ The debt of H. D. (Hilda Doolittle, 1886–1961) to Hellenism is similarly well-known; Eileen Gregory’s magisterial book is an essential resource for any serious student of H. D.’s work.⁵ Aldington’s Hellenism has received considerably less critical attention than it deserves but is nevertheless crucial to any understanding of his work.⁶ This chapter will focus on one hitherto under-studied point in the Imagists’ reception of Greek literature: their repeated claim that their *vers libre* reflected the meters of Greek lyric poetry and tragic choruses. This remarkable claim has inspired very little critical discussion, but it offers a fascinating window into the Imagists’ relationship to classics and the classical world and the importance they attributed to presumed ancient models for their own work. Alongside their aggressive iconoclasm and their forceful insistence that they were inventing new forms, they no less forcefully insisted that they were resurrecting, or rediscovering, poetic forms that reached back to the very beginnings of European poetry.

belief is that the name took Ezra’s fancy, and that he kept it *in petto* for the right occasion. If there were no Imagists, obviously they would have to be invented.” On the dialogue of the Japanese poet Junzaburo Nishiwaki with Imagism, and Aldington’s “Choricos” in particular, see Yatsushashi, this volume.

- 3 In an undated letter [December 1912?] to Alice Corbin Henderson, Pound ((1993), 4) said: “The note in *Poetry* is very incorrect. Imagism is concerned solely with *language and presentation*. Hellenism & *vers libre* have nothing to do with it;” he adds that “the poor word ‘Hellenist’ is so frightfully at a discount that one hates to see a new school damned with it.”
- 4 The bibliography on Pound and classics is vast. Kenner (1971) remains a crucial starting point, esp. “The Muse in Tatters,” 54–75. The foremost study of the *Homage to Sextus Propertius* is still Sullivan (1964). See also, e.g., Arkins (1988); Coyle (2019); Dingee (2019); Hooley (1988), 28–54; Moody (2007), 349–54; Riikonen (2008), 181–94; and Yao (2002), 52–78 (ch. 2). Liebrechts (2019) appeared too late for me to make use of it in this chapter.
- 5 Gregory (1997). See also Beyers (2001), 135–78 (Ch. 4); Brinkman and Brinkman (2017); Collecott (1999), especially 103–34 (Ch. 4); and Swann (1962).
- 6 I hope to fill this lacuna with my book in progress, *Gold Words of a Greek Long Dead: Richard Aldington’s Classical Receptions*.

Although they would have hotly denied it, the Imagists' understanding of Greek culture and literature was largely mediated through nineteenth-century ideas of the Hellenic.⁷ The Greece they claimed proudly as their ancestor and inspiration was, to a great extent, an imaginary "Hellas" that existed only in and through their own creation of it.⁸ To sustain this "Hellas" required ignoring a great deal of ancient evidence, just as to hail "hardness" and lack of "slither" (the inimitable term is Pound's)⁹ as the hallmark of Greek poetry required carefully selective and tendentious reading. In particular, the claim that "free verse" as the Imagists practiced it was derived from or based on Greek metrical practice is factually impossible; if Pound, Aldington, Flint, and the others genuinely believed that they were deriving their *vers libre* from Greek models, then they had profoundly misunderstood the basic principles of Greek meter.

1 Greek Free Verse: The Claims

In 1914, Pound wrote that any unprejudiced reader who considers the choruses of Euripides will find the essence of free verse there:

If the earnest upholder of conventional imbecility will turn at random to the works of Euripides, or in particular to such passages as *Hippolytus*, 1268 *et seq.*, or to *Alkestis* 266 *et seq.*, or idem 455 *et seq.*, or to *Phoenissae* 1030 *et circa*, or to almost any notable Greek chorus, it is vaguely possible that the light of *vers libre* might spread some faint aurora upon his cerebral tissues.¹⁰

Aldington claimed even more. In a 1917 letter to Amy Lowell (1874–1925), he stated:

7 Aldington (1914a) sums up his overall conception of "Hellas" as "blithe," dedicated to "health," "simplicity," "moderation," and so on. The Imagists were far from alone in this; see, for instance, Worman's discussion ((2019), 7) of how Virginia Woolf treats Greek tragedy as "uniquely un-British, sun-drenched and close to the 'primary' human."

8 H. D. recognized this; she wrote to Norman Holmes Pearson that her Hellas was "Lotus-land, all this. It is nostalgia for a lost land. I call it Hellas. I might, psychologically just as well, have listed the Casco Bay islands off the coast of Maine but I called my islands Rhodes, Samos and Cos. They are symbols." H. D. (1937/1987–88), 72. See Gregory's discussion of this quotation ((1997), 33).

9 In an October 1912 letter to Harriet Monroe, Pound ((1950), 11) introduced H. D.'s work by saying it was "Objective – no slither; direct – no excessive use of adjectives, no metaphors that won't permit examination. It's straight talk, straight as the Greek!"

10 Pound (1914), 140.

I began to write vers libre about the early part of 1911, partly because I was fatigued with rhyme & partly because of the interest I had in poetic experiment. I didn't know Heine or Patmore's "Unknown Eros" & never suspected the existence of the French vers libristes. I got the idea from a chorus in the Hippolytus of Euripides. In fact the cadence of Choricos and the Greek Marble – the earliest of my poems in Images, written when I was just 18 – is very similar to that of Hippolytus' invocation to Artemis, though, of course, the subject is very different.¹¹

H. D. implies the same point in the prefatory note to her translation of choruses from Euripides' *Iphigeneia in Aulis* for the *Poets' Translation Series*. Her poetic form, she says, reflects Euripides', particularly his "cadence":

A literal, word-for-word version of so well-known an author as Euripides would be useless and supererogatory; a rhymed, languidly Swinburnian verse form is an insult and a barbarism. It seemed, therefore, that the rhymeless hard rhythms used in the present version would be most likely to keep the sharp edges and irregular cadence of the original.¹²

By choosing to translate Euripides (rather than some more obscure author) and to do so in free verse, H. D. was openly positioning herself in opposition to one of the most popular and successful translators of the day.¹³ Her barbed reference to translation in "rhymed, languidly Swinburnian verse form" must surely be aimed at Gilbert Murray (1866–1957), whose translations of Euripides into highly ornate, metrical, rhymed verse were extraordinarily popular in the 1910s, among theatre-goers as well as readers.¹⁴ Murray was the Regius Professor of Greek at Oxford; H. D.'s claim that her free verse was more true to the "cadence" of the original than Murray's versions thus not only openly challenges the practice of a pre-eminent contemporary translator but also discounts the authority of a leading scholar.

F. S. Flint (1885–1960), too, asserts that ancient Greek meter was in essence the same thing as "cadenced" free verse and treats scholars with scorn. In the preface to his third book of poems, *Otherworld: Cadences* (1920), Flint says: "I have seen scansion of Greek choruses which showed that these were nothing more – and certainly nothing less – than cadences, whatever the professors

11 Aldington (1992), 28; letter dated November 20 [?], 1917.

12 H. D. (1915), 171.

13 See further Vandiver (2019), 13–14.

14 The bibliography on Murray's translations is substantial; Morwood (2007) offers one starting-point.

with their tabulated meters and complicated feet and lists of admitted exceptions may say."¹⁵ One is left wishing that Flint had specified what scansion (and whose) he saw of Greek choruses that made them appear to be "cadences." His terse claim, in a 1917 letter to J. C. Squire (1884–1958), that "*vers libre* was written by Euripides, in spite of the professors" does nothing to clarify his grounds for that claim, but does contribute to the overall impression that the Imagists probably reinforced one another's belief in ancient Greek *vers libre* through repetitions of this type of blanket assertion in conversations among themselves.¹⁶ Such conversations would, of course, have left no record – a frustration for the researcher.

2 Cadence: The Essence of Free Verse?

Pound, Aldington, Lowell, and Flint all identified the hallmark of free verse as its dependence on "cadence" rather than on regular meter. Since they also claimed to hear similar "cadences" in Greek poetry, the question arises of what they meant by "cadence." This obvious question, however, admits of no obvious answer. Unfortunately, no Imagist ever clearly defines "cadence," and they appear to disagree with one another about its meaning. Robert Graves (1895–1985) commented caustically in 1925 on some contemporary poets' tendency towards "inventing rather foggy new patterns of their own which they call 'cadences,'" and the passage of nearly a century has not materially diminished the foginess.¹⁷

15 Flint (1920a), vi.

16 Copp (2009), 178: letter dated January 29, 1917.

17 Graves (1925), 24. Kirby-Smith's description ((1996), 9) reflects the frustration of trying to understand what precisely is meant by "cadence" in discussions of free verse: "Those who assert the existence of such a cadence cannot explain what it is; they may claim to hear it and they may talk about it, but they are unable to describe it qualitatively, let alone scan it. My treatment will not rescue them from their bafflement since it is not possible to invent explanations for something that is not there." Beyers ((2001), 25) calls cadence "an anti-term designating a rhythm that does not conform to any established model;" see his whole discussion, Beyers (2001), 23–7. Adams ((1997), 156) suggests that in practice "cadenced" verse, for the Imagists, meant verse in which "the falling intonation that marks phrase boundaries to the ear are [sic] emphasized by the lineation." He prefers the term "phrasal free verse" and does not discuss cadence further, beyond noting that "proponents of free verse at this innovative time wrote a great deal about 'cadence.'" *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* is surprisingly unenlightening on the exact meaning of "cadence." Its third definition is the pertinent one (Brogan and Cocola (2012)): "A term often used to describe the rhythmical flow of such nonmetrical prosodies as found in the Bible, in Walt Whitman, in free verse, and in the prose poem. Drawn from music, the term used in this third sense implies a looser, more irregular concept of

What did the Imagists themselves say about “cadence”? In the Preface to *Some Imagist Poets* (1916), Lowell gives this explanation:

The definition of *vers libre* is – a verse-form based upon cadence. Now cadence in music is one thing, cadence in poetry quite another, since we are not dealing with tone but with rhythm. It is the sense of perfect balance of flow and rhythm. Not only must the syllables so fall as to increase and continue the movement, but the whole poem must be as rounded and recurring as the circular swing of a balanced pendulum.¹⁸

This clarifies remarkably little; “the sense of perfect balance of flow and rhythm” will surely vary from one hearer’s ear (or reader’s eye) to another, and the comparison of a “rounded” poem to a pendulum’s circular swing sheds little light. Lowell’s further discussion indicates that she considers the “cadence” a unit of time:

Suppose a person were given the task of walking, or running, round a large circle, with two minutes given to do it in. [...] He might dawdle in the beginning, and run madly to reach the half-circle mark on time, and then complete his task by walking steadily round the second half to goal. Or he might leap, and run, and skip, and linger in all sorts of ways [...] only so that he were just one minute in traversing the first half-circle, and just one minute in traversing the second.¹⁹

Lowell supports her understanding of “cadence” as a time-unit by citing Greek precedent:

The unit in *vers libre* is [...] the strophe, which may be the whole poem, or may be only a part. Each strophe is a complete circle: in fact, the meaning of the Greek word “strophe” is simply that part of the poem which was

poetic rhythm than that applied to metrical poetry and mainly refers to phrasing, which extends beyond foot-based scansion. Cadence is here determined by ample and flexible sonic features incl. assonance and consonance and is shaped both by stichic concerns and strophic considerations” (emphasis added). The article on free verse (Cooper (2012)) refers to cadence throughout but gives no further elucidation of the term. In his polemical (and often very witty) article on “word-group cadence,” Nist ((1964), 77) gives a definition that does not seem to have been widely adopted: “In English, a cadence is *that rhythmic pattern or accentual collocation which occurs between two actualized major junctures*” (emphasis original). Attridge (1995) does not use the term “cadence,” nor does it appear in the discussion of “non-metrical verse” in Attridge (2014), 316–24.

18 Lowell (1916), viii–ix.

19 Lowell (1916), ix–x.

recited while the chorus were making a turn round the altar set up in the center of the theatre. The simile of the circle is more than a simile, therefore; it is a fact. Of course the circle need not always be the same size, nor need the times allowed to negotiate it be always the same. There is room here for an infinite number of variations.²⁰

Among other difficulties, these comments reveal Lowell's misunderstanding of what "strophe" means in Greek poetry. Her insistence on the significance of the "circle" is misplaced; while the Greek tragic chorus definitely danced, there is no certainty that the fifth-century orchestra was circular, no firm evidence for an altar in its center, and no reason to suppose that the choral dances were always circular.²¹ Lowell cannot be faulted, of course, for trusting the received opinions of her day about Greek theatrical practice. But while the term "strophe" ("turn") was probably originally drawn from choral movement, in Greek poetic terminology it means a particular kind of poetic structure defined by metrical exactitude:

The *strophe* is a structure longer than a single verse, made up of one or more periods, and recurring in the same form, whether immediately or after intervening matter. When there is only one recurrence, the second strophe is called the *antistrophe*. [...] The metrical agreement between strophes is known as *responson*.²²

Exact metrical *responson* requires that the strophe have a fixed and recognizable metrical pattern. Whatever the original reason for using the word "turn" to mean "a structure longer than a single verse [...] recurring in the same form," the key element is "recurring in the same form," not what shape that "turn" took in dance nor some notional idea of the length of time it took to make the "turn."²³ Lowell's further definitions are not much more helpful. In 1920 she wrote:

By "cadence" in poetry, we mean a rhythmic curve, containing one or more stressed accents, and corresponding roughly to the necessity of breathing. This must also correspond to a depression or slight dropping

20 Lowell (1916), x.

21 See *inter alia* Gebhard (1974) and Ashby (1999), ch. 3, on the shape of the orchestra; and Ashby (1999), ch. 4, on the position of the altar. For an overview of the issues with essential bibliography, see Powers (2014), 12–23.

22 West (1987), 4.

23 Collecott ((2003), 6) repeats Lowell's error when she says that H. D.'s "rhythms are adapted from the turning movements of the Greek chorus – *strophe* and *antistrophe* – which approach, meet, retreat."

in the tension of the subject at that point. These curves are made up of a number of time-units, which, again, although they do not accord perfectly, still do so with extraordinary approximation. Cadenced verse is non-syllabic, and in that sense resembles music far more than the old metrical verse ever did. As music varies the numbers of notes in a bar by splitting them up into smaller time valuations so cadenced verse may vary the number of its syllables within the duration of its time-units to any extent desired.²⁴

Here, of course, Lowell ignores an obvious distinction. Standard musical notation sets out exact equivalencies within musical measures, so that, e.g., two half notes take the same time as one half note and two quarters; this is an agreed-upon convention understood by composers and performers alike. (Performers and conductors may of course vary the tempo, but the relationships between time-values of notes are set.) But in free verse there is no agreed-upon unit of measure and no set system for determining which patterns of syllables are equivalent, in terms of time, to which other patterns. Interestingly, Pound makes a very similar musical analogy:

No-one is so foolish as to suppose that a musician using "four-four" time is compelled to use always four quarter notes in each bar, or in "seven-eighths" time to use seven eighth notes uniformly in each bar. He may use one $\frac{1}{2}$, and one $\frac{1}{8}$ rest, or any such combination as he may happen to choose or find fitting.

To apply this musical truism to verse is to employ *vers libre*.²⁵

This musical analogy must, if it means anything, indicate that Pound and Lowell both thought that "free verse" did indeed have some sort of underlying time-unit; in other words, that it was not entirely "free." In this, they differed markedly from other defenders of free verse, who were adamant that it could contain no set time-unit or measure.

Lowell believed she had in fact demonstrated that free verse involved consistent time-units. W. M. Patterson made several recordings of Lowell reading various examples of free verse.²⁶ Lowell believed that these experiments showed

24 Lowell (1920), 141. She first used the term "curve" to describe *vers libre* in Lowell (1914).

25 Pound (1914), 140.

26 Lowell (1920); see also her earlier article, Lowell (1918). Although Lowell thought that her readings in Patterson's laboratory proved her points about *vers libre*, Patterson himself ((1917), xii) remained cordial but unconvinced; in the preface to the second edition of *The Rhythm of Prose*, he commented that Lowell's readings showed "nothing, as yet,

each "cadence" took the same amount of time to deliver. They may indeed have done so in her readings, but there is no obvious reason to assume that another reader would read a particular free verse poem aloud in precisely the same way or even that another reader would identify the same groups of words as "cadences" and thus ensure that the "rhythmic curves" of a given poem would be consistently detectable. Lowell appears to have intuited that English is an "accent-timed" language, in which speakers "quite unconsciously try to equalize the time span between primary accents, regardless of the number of syllables."²⁷ But for her system to work as she proposes, there would have to be agreement about where the primary accents fall in any given free verse poem, and how those accents interact with one another to form "cadences." But in fact, quite the contrary to this, there is evidence that different readers do *not* automatically hear the same accents in a sample of free verse.

If we compare Lowell's markings of the stresses and "cadences" in H. D.'s poem "Oread" with the scansion of the same poem given by Harriet Monroe (1860–1936), we find that the two disagree on the proper reading of every line. Marking the stresses with an acute accent and "divid[ing] the cadences by an oblique line," Lowell gives the following scansion of "Oread":

Whirl úp / séa – /
 Whírl / your pointed pínes /
 Splásh / your great pínes / on our rócks /
 Húrl / your green óver us /
 Cóver us / with your póols / of fír /²⁸

Leaving aside the oddity of one-word "cadences," Lowell's stress patterns seem highly arbitrary.²⁹ It is very striking that Monroe's scansion of this same poem disagrees fundamentally with Lowell's. In Monroe's scansion, which she gives in musical notation, the poem reads:

which indicates a difference in *kind* between the 'cadences' of this *vers libre* and those of emotional prose." Hartman ((1980), 39–42) gives a very useful discussion of Lowell and Patterson's experiments and the "performative fallacy."

27 Adams (1997), 4.

28 Lowell (1920), 143. "Oread" (first printed in Lowell (1915), 28) by H. D. (Hilda Doolittle): H. D. (1986), 55, copyright ©1914 by Hilda Doolittle. Reprinted by permission of New Directions Publishing Corp. "On our rocks" should be printed as a separate line.

29 Lowell (1917) printed the "oblique lines," but she does not there indicate that they represent cadence breaks. In fact, she says ((1917), 264): "It will quickly be seen that this poem is made up of five cadences." Unless she intends "cadence" here simply to mean "line," it is impossible to know what she means by these "five cadences."

Whirl up, séa
 Whirl your póinted pínes.
 Splásh your gréat pínes
 Ón our rócks.
 Húrl your gréen over us
 Cover us with your póols of fir.³⁰

Setting the two scansions side by side in schematic form highlights the differences and demonstrates that any theory of “cadence” that relies on the relationships of these accents must be arbitrary. For clarity, I have replaced the slanted lines with which Lowell marked the “cadences” with upright lines (|). Monroe’s musical notation casts the piece in 3/4 time and makes liberal use of rests; I have used the upright lines to indicate where she shows measure breaks and have used the symbol * to indicate a rest.

Lowell:

˘ / | / |
 Whirl up, | sea |

 / | ˘ ˘ / |
 whirl | your pointed pines |

 / | ˘ ˘ / |
 Splash | your great pines |

˘ ˘ / |
 on our rocks |

 / | ˘ ˘ / ˘ ˘ |
 Hurl | your green over us |

 / ˘ ˘ | ˘ ˘ /
 Cover us | with your pools |

˘ / |
 of fir |

Monroe:

˘ ˘ * | * / |
 Whirl up, | sea |

* / | ˘ / | ˘ / |
 whirl | your point - | ed pines |

* / | ˘ / | * / |
 Splash | your great | pines |

* / | ˘ / |
 on | our rocks |

* / | ˘ / | ˘ ˘ ˘ |
 Hurl | your green | over us |

* ˘ ˘ ˘ | * / | ˘ / |
 Cover us | with | your pools |

˘ / |
 of fir |³¹

30 Monroe (1926), 298. Her stressed prepositions “on” and “with” obviously deviate oddly from normal spoken stress patterns.

31 For the first measure of the final line, Monroe assumes an initial quarter rest, a quarter note for “co-,” and an eighth note each for “-ver” and “us.”

Lowell finds two strong accents in the first line's three monosyllables, where Monroe marks only one; Lowell analyzes the second line as two "cadences," the first consisting of one monosyllabic word and the second of three words (with four syllables), while Monroe scans it as three measures, the first of one monosyllabic word followed by two measures of two syllables each with a word break over them; Lowell finds two cadences in the third line, while Monroe finds three measures, and so on. The disagreement between the two is perhaps most noticeable in the third line, which Lowell reads as "SPLASH your great PINES" while Monroe hears "SPLASH your GREAT [pause] PINES" – thus giving a strong emphasis to "great" which Lowell treats as an unaccented weak syllable. If these two promoters of Imagist free verse, Monroe and Lowell, can disagree so markedly about the basic rhythm of one of Imagism's most famous (and shortest) poems, then it would seem that the "cadences" of free verse are neither so strongly marked nor so intuitively obvious as Lowell claimed.³²

Lowell's definitions of "cadence," then, are not helpful in clarifying the term. Flint is perhaps even more puzzling. On the one hand, in opposition to some of his peers, he flatly claims that "free verse" and "cadence" are not in fact "verse" at all:

There is no difference of kind between prose and verse. Since they are both words in order, and both have rhythm, it is obvious that they are essentially the same. Verse, however, has measure as well as rhythm. It may also have rhyme. "Free verse" has no measure, and it cannot, therefore, properly be called "verse." "Cadence" would be a better word for it. *Cadence differs in no way from prose.* Its rhythm is more strongly felt, and it is printed in lines of varying length in order that this rhythm may be marked. But there is no justification for printing prose in this way, except to point to a definite rhythmic intention.³³ (emphasis added)

Nor is "verse" the same as "poetry;" in the Preface to his book *Otherworld: Cadences*, Flint says: "There is only one art of writing, and that is the art of poetry [...] whether it is in the form we call prose, or in rhyme and metre, or in the unrhymed cadence in which the greater part of this book is written."³⁴ Further, he goes on to suggest that "cadence" is "the real tradition of English poetry, and that my own unrhymed cadences and those of other writers are,

32 My own reading of the poem disagrees with both Lowell and Monroe; I hear the stresses as: Whirl úp, séa / Whirl your pointed pines / Splásh your gréat pines / On our rócks / Húrl your gréén óver us / Cóver us with your póols of fir.

33 Flint (1920b), 18.

34 Flint (1920a), v.

in fact, a reversion to that tradition.”³⁵ Near the end of his Preface he returns to the idea that “poetry” merely means “artistic writing” and that form is irrelevant to it:

For the poets such as I have in mind, there are the two forms, which are really one, the first being prose and the second I have called unrhymed cadence. The one merges into the other; there is no boundary line between them; but prose, generally, will be used for the more objective branches of writing – for novels, plays, essays and so on [...]; cadence will be used for personal, emotional, lyric utterances, in which the phrasing goes with a stronger beat and the words live together with an intenser flame. If you ask why cadence should not be printed as prose, the answer is that the unequal lines mark the movement of the cadence and its tempo.³⁶

With reference to the supposed presence of “cadenced” free verse in Greek choral lyrics, then, Flint apparently would claim that Greek lyric and tragic poets actually wrote a form of prose. Since he excludes meter from his discussion as, by definition, an unimportant add-on to “poetry,” he is almost forced into this absurd position; yet any Greek auditor would have recognized the metrical patterns of choral lyrics and would have agreed that the difference *of form* between poetry and prose lies precisely in poetry’s meters.

3 Quantitative Meter in Greek Poetry

Most scholars have taken the Imagists’ word for it that Greek poetry had a “cadence” (whatever that means) similar to that of English “free verse.” To take a small sample from Aldington scholarship alone, Kittredge reports that Aldington “pointed to the similarity of cadence between Hippolytus’ invocation to Artemis and his own ‘Choricos’ and ‘The Greek Marble,’” without discussing what that “similarity of cadence” might be or if it in fact existed.³⁷ Hartman says that when Aldington claims that ancient poets used a form of free verse, he “seems to be speaking of logaoedic verse;” however, Hartman is a bit shaky about the exact meaning of “logaoedic verse” (a term no longer in favor among scholars of Greek meter) and too willing to believe unquestioningly Aldington’s assertions about the similarities between ancient meter

35 Flint (1920a), vi.

36 Flint (1920a), xi–xii.

37 Kittredge (1976), 42–3.

and modern "cadence."³⁸ Gates says that Aldington's early poem "Choricos" is "like the Greek poetry that Aldington knew and loved," since it "depends on the cadences of the lines for poetic form to reinforce its language," and Galloway states bluntly that Aldington "carefully pointed out on several occasions that free verse was by no means new; [...] [he] traces its use back to Greek writers – from whose works, incidentally, he himself had been inspired to experiment with the form."³⁹ Aldington's two biographers also accept his word about ancient free verse. Vivien Whelpton notes that Aldington always "maintained that the impetus [for free verse] came from Greek choruses;" and Charles Doyle mentions the influence of Greek verse several times: e.g., "His practical starting point [for free verse] was a chorus from Euripides' *Hippolytus*;" "free verse was also influenced [...] in Aldington's case, by a chorus in Euripides' *Hippolytus*;" and Aldington's "unrhymed pieces with no formal metrical scheme" were "influenced by Greek choruses."⁴⁰ It would be tedious to multiply examples (though they exist for other Imagists as well), but it is worth noting that none of these scholars, or others writing about the Imagists, has thought it necessary to investigate whether it is actually the case that Greek choruses bore any resemblance to the Imagists' free verse, and if so what the similarity might be.

One reason for this unusually trusting critical stance is undoubtedly that most critics writing on Imagism are themselves unable to read Greek and so do not realize that such a claim presents formidable problems. It is useful to compare here Helen Carr's comment that H. D.'s "Hermes of the Ways" sounds "as spare as a faithful translation from the Greek" and her musing that "since H. D. created so powerfully our present sense of what a Greek poem should be, perhaps it sounds that way because she invented Greek poetry for the modern English reader."⁴¹ "Hermes of the Ways" is a poem of 54 lines, varying in syllables from eight to two. It incorporates a loose translation of an epigram by Anyte of Tegea, which is formally indistinguishable from the rest of H. D.'s poem; but the original epigram was, of course, written in elegiac couplets, a formal and regular meter that is entirely unlike H. D.'s short irregular lines. Despite Carr, then, to someone who can read Greek poetry in the original, "Hermes of the Ways" and H. D.'s other poems do not in fact sound particularly "Greek" in their form or structure.

38 Hartman (1980), 114–15. On "logaoedic verse," see West's definition ((1982), 197): "Logaoedic, anciently applied to verses [...] like the archebulean and praxilleian; in the nineteenth century extended to all verse of asymmetric rhythm, in the twentieth abandoned in disgust."

39 Gates (1974), 36; Galloway (1972), 133.

40 Whelpton (2014), 56; Doyle (1989), 11; 328 n. 4; 19.

41 Carr (2009), 493.

Yet the assumption that the Imagists' free verse is *metrically* similar to, and based on, ancient Greek verse is now firmly embedded in modern English-language scholarship on Imagism.⁴² But the fact remains that ancient Greek poetry was written in formal quantitative meters, a form entirely unlike free verse. That the discrepancy between this fact and the Imagists' claims has attracted so little attention from scholars of Imagism and Modernism may also be due in part to the remarkably convoluted and often contradictory terminology used to discuss English prosody.

The history of English metrical terminology is obviously far beyond the scope of this chapter, and the bibliography is vast. However, the main point here is that while English metricians took over the terminology of "long" and "short" syllables from classical metrics, these terms were frequently used to refer to the stressed and unstressed syllables of English verse, rather than to actual syllabic quantity.⁴³ This type of terminological confusion was not the only pitfall for English metrical theory; in addition, metrical systems based on analogies with music, such as those espoused by Sidney Lanier (1842–1881), remained popular into the twentieth century and as we have seen appealed strongly to Pound and to Lowell. Drawing on Lanier's theories, Monroe insisted that all meter is and must be quantitative, in flat defiance of actual English pronunciation.⁴⁴

But syllabic quantity is not readily detectable in English. As Hartman observes, "English recognizes no established, conventional rules for determining the quantity of a syllable, [so] metrical organizations based on it risk inaudibility."⁴⁵ While it is undoubtedly true that some syllables do indeed take longer to pronounce than others, English-speakers do not register these time-differences as metrically meaningful.⁴⁶ Thus, when classically-trained poets attempted to impose "quantitative" patterns onto English verse, the result

42 E.g. (among many others), Brinkman and Brinkman (2017), 40; Carr (2009), 447, 619; Coffman (1972), 182; Duncan (2011), 101; Gates (1974), 36.

43 On the complicated question of what exactly "quantity" is (which luckily is not directly germane to my argument here), see Attridge (1974), 7–13.

44 Monroe (1913), 61–8. See also Lanier (1880), and the discussion in Hartman (1980), 37–40.

45 Hartman (1980), 34. He cites Wimsatt and Beardsley (1959), 589: "Quantity is a dimension where you cannot make mistakes in pronunciation in English. And where you cannot make mistakes, you cannot be right, as opposed to wrong. [...] The English language will not permit a quantitative pattern." See also Fussell (1979), 12: "The English language is so heavily accented that no other of its characteristics but accent seems to furnish a basis for meter;" and Adams (1997), 66: "In English, we simply do not attend to the length of time given to vowel sounds in our speech."

46 Differences of vowel-length can, of course, represent differences of *meaning*; the distinction between "bit" and "beat," or between "let" and "late," depends upon vowel length (i.e.,

is a poetry of visual, not auditory, recognition.⁴⁷ Greek and Latin poetry, in contrast, were built precisely and fundamentally upon the audible distinction between long and short syllables, not on stress accent:

Metrics is the science of measuring verses. Greek metrics is based on the alternation of long syllables (–) and short syllables (˘). Long syllables are quantitatively double the short ones. Greek is a quantitative language with a musical or tonic accent, while the English language possesses a dynamic or stress accent, with only very weak traces of quantity as duration (and then only in accented syllables).⁴⁸

The understandable confusion of writers on English prosody over the exact workings of classical meter has obscured the oddity of the Imagists' claims. Free verse in English, which dispenses with fixed patterns of stress in favor of "cadences" where the stresses shift from line to line with no repeated pattern, is in no way the same thing as, or even analogous to, quantitative Greek meter, where long and short syllables occupied fixed places and fixed patterns. The Greek patterns could be remarkably complex and could allow for many substitutions of two short syllables for one long (or vice versa), but a group of words lacking any regular metrical pattern would, in Greek terminology, not have been poetry at all, but prose. And again, any Greek metrical pattern, to be recognized as metrical at all, had to be quantitative; there was no other option, since the Greek pitch accent did not feature in Greek understandings of meter. The crucial question then becomes what the Imagists knew, or thought they knew, about quantity. When they claimed to detect "cadences" resembling their own free verse in ancient poetry, were they in fact talking about quantity? Did they recognize the difference between quantity in ancient verse and accent in English verse? Did they think quantitative verse was possible in English?

The Imagists did more than just vaguely claim that ancient authors used free verse; Aldington explicitly said that his earliest poems were directly inspired by passages in Euripides' *Hippolytus*. What is more, Aldington clearly knew that Greek verse is always metrical; his early working notebooks include correct scansion of the Sapphic strophe and of other classical meters. An off-hand remark in a letter of 1954 suggests that perhaps Aldington's ability to

quantity). But the point here is that the distinction between long and short vowel has no *metrical* significance in English.

47 On quantitative poetry in English, see above all Attridge (1974). For a discussion of nineteenth-century debates over whether English hexameters should be written quantitatively or accentually, see Prins (2005), 248–9.

48 Gentili and Lomiento (2008), 27.

scan the Sapphic strophe on the page did not imply any real understanding of how that meter would sound if read quantitatively; writing about Isaac Watts's "Day of Judgement," Aldington commented: "These sapphics may perhaps fill a classical scholar with horror, but *I don't know enough to be offended*."⁴⁹ Watts's meter in "Day of Judgement" is the variety of English Sapphics that appears most famously in "The Friend of Humanity and the Knife-Grinder" by George Canning (1770–1827). The syllabic count is the same as in Greek Sapphics, but the metrical pattern is very different indeed. Watts's meter is, of course, accentual rather than quantitative. It is certainly possible to write accentual English Sapphics that place the accented syllables in the same metrical positions as the long quantities in Greek, and many translators have adopted this method of suggesting the ancient meter. Watts's English Sapphics, however, are not of this type. The accented syllables in Watts's meter do not fall in the same metrical positions as the long quantities in Sappho's meter, and the rhythm of the two types of "Sapphics" is markedly different.⁵⁰

Aldington's comment about Watts's Sapphics (that he did not know enough to be offended) could suggest that although he was able to scan Sappho's "Hymn to Aphrodite" mechanically, Aldington never internalized the rhythmic pattern of that meter. However, the matter cannot be quite so simple, since on the same page of his early notebook that features the correct scansion of Sappho's Greek lines, Aldington has drafted a poem in reasonably competent accentual Sapphics.⁵¹ Furthermore, Aldington was attuned to traditional scansion in English poetry, as shown by a 1915 letter to Monroe in which he offers a dactylic scansion of Dekker's line "Wind, jolly huntsman, your neat bugles

49 Aldington (1975), 108, letter dated January 11, 1954. Emphasis added.

50 Very surprisingly, Adams ((1997), 68) claims that Watts's meter is "an accentual replication of classical sapphics," citing a stanza by Watts (from "The Day of Judgement") and another by Jay Macpherson (from "Lost Soul"). Adams ((1997), 67) has just given the scansion of a classical sapphic but does not notice that the third and fifth syllables must always be long, in Greek. Thus, in accentual Sapphics that attempt to replicate the pattern of Greek Sapphics, these same syllables must be stressed. But to stress the third and fifth syllables in the stanzas Adams quotes would require impossible pronunciations, such as "Thoughts, like óld vultúres" (Watts), "Lófty júdge frówníng" (Watts), and (worst of all) "Nów I récánt, réturn [...]" (Macpherson). These English Sapphics are obviously *not* replicating Sappho's meter in accentual form but are working on a very different stress-pattern: "Thoughts, like old vultúres, préy upon their héart-strings." Adams makes a similar error in assuming that Pound's "Apparuit" is quantitative, not accentual; see below.

51 *Richard Aldington (1910–1962) Papers*, Special Collections Research Center, Southern Illinois University, Coll. 68/9/3. Although SIU's cataloging lists this notebook under the sub-heading "1911–13 translation," in fact it contains some original poems.

shrilly."⁵² Perhaps by 1954 Aldington had simply forgotten how quantitative meter worked.

In any case, there is no readily apparent similarity between Aldington's earliest poems and Euripides' meters. Even "To a Greek Marble," which opens with the repeated Greek word *potnia* (as does Euripides' *Hippolytus* l.62), does not reproduce the rhythm of Euripides' lines. To make "To a Greek Marble" parallel Euripides' meter, the reader would have to use such clearly impossible stresses as "pítý my sadnéss." Perhaps, in defiance of all the evidence, Aldington was reading Euripides' lines according to their pitch accents and not their quantities. But to match the pitch accents of Euripides' lines, we would have to read "pítý mý sadness" – and no reader would ever stress "pity" on the second syllable. Clearly, when Aldington said that the "cadence" of his lines was very similar to the cadences in Euripides' *Hippolytus*, he could not have meant that the natural English stresses of his lines reproduced either the quantitative meter or the pitch accents of the Greek. One is driven to assume that Aldington had some idiosyncratic way of reading Greek poetry that revealed, to his ear, a "cadence" based neither on quantity nor on pitch accent; but what this "cadence" may in fact have been remains mysterious.⁵³

The mystery only deepens when we consider Aldington's remarks in his article "Free Verse in England":

The finest English poets have been stunted by their mediaeval versification. The best Greek poets – Alcman, Sappho, Alcaeus, Ibycus, Anacreon even, and the Attic dramatists in their lyric choruses – used a kind of free verse, which is perhaps the finest poetry we have. I am aware that German professors have laboriously worked out the scansion of this poetry; I have compared their scansion with that of certain English free verse poems and if anything the English poems are more regular.⁵⁴

52 Richard Aldington, letter to Harriet Monroe, Dec. 15, 1920; *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse* Records, Box 30, Folder 10. Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library.

53 It is just possible that Aldington was thinking primarily of the *visual* appearance of a Greek choral ode on the page, which can indeed be somewhat similar to the appearance of Aldington's own poems, with their irregular lines. I owe this suggestion to Andrew Laird. Compare Adams's statement ((1997), 150) that "to a much greater extent than metrical verse, free verse depends on the typographic conventions of poetry, the visual layout on the page."

54 Aldington (1914b), 351.

This is a tantalizing, and a frustrating, comment, not least because it plays a bit fast and loose with the facts. The recognition that Greek verse depended on syllabic quantity was already discussed by ancient scholars some two millennia before the “German professors” whom Aldington derides, and he must have known this.⁵⁵ Moreover, on September 15, 1914 such a statement could only be polemical: a reference to “German professors” could not be neutral in an English magazine of September 1914, no matter how anti-establishment that magazine might be. In effect, Aldington is equating anyone who argues for traditional scansion of Greek poetry with the German proponents of “Kultur” who had burned the great library of Louvain only three weeks previously (August 25, 1914).

Since Aldington does not specify which poems he means by “certain English free verse poems” whose scansion he has compared to the “German” scansion of Greek poetry, his statement that the English poems are more regular cannot be verified; but the claim is factually impossible. As A. M. Dale succinctly summarizes:

“Vers libre” emancipates itself from structural principle and proceeds arbitrarily, with none but empirical elements; the subtlety of its rhythms is not a formal complexity but arises from the fusion of a number of indeterminates [...] In all this there is nothing of the formal elaboration which makes Greek metric a difficult and involved but systematic study. English verse has an extremely simple metrical structure with infinite degrees of modification reducible to no laws, whereas Greek verse starts from conventionally fixed units, syllables of certain lengths, and achieves its variety by combining these in extremely elaborate patterns, reducible to laws of great complexity.⁵⁶

Indeed, Aldington undermines his own claim at the outset by citing Sappho and Alcaeus, since these two poets frequently used meters that did not allow for substitutions of two short syllables for one long or vice versa.⁵⁷ Sappho’s most famous meter, the Sapphic strophe, consists of a four-line stanza, the first three lines having eleven syllables and the fourth line having five syllables.⁵⁸ While

55 See Allen (1987), 104: “The rules of quantity are readily deduced from metrical usage, and are fully discussed by the Greek grammarians (e.g., Dionysius Thrax [...] [and] Hephaestion).” Dionysius Thrax lived in the 2nd c. BCE, Hephaestion in the 2nd c. CE.

56 Dale (1968), 9.

57 See West (1987), 2.

58 This is the traditional printing, although it is probably more accurate to think of a three-line stanza, the first two lines having eleven syllables and the third line having sixteen.

some syllables in the Sapphic strophe are "anceps" (i.e., they can be either long or short), the number of syllables per line cannot vary. The syllable count of the Sapphic line is fixed and immutable, while the hallmark of English "free verse" is a line of variable length. Among the verse forms Aldington mentions, only in the tragic choruses are substitutions so common that the regularity of the metrical pattern can at times be hard to detect, but even tragic choruses adhere to fixed patterns, however complicated. And again, Aldington's statement ignores that Greek verse is scanned quantitatively and English verse is not. His comparison of the two scansion, then, seems to imply that he thought – or chose to assume – that quantitative meter was not actually the driving force of Greek verse.

Aldington underestimated the importance of quantity for ancient meter; in contrast, Pound overestimated its applicability to modern English verse. Thinking that "the desire for *vers libre* is due to the sense of quantity reasserting itself after years of starvation,"⁵⁹ Pound assumed that the Greek rules could be transposed directly into English practice; in his early polemic "The Tradition," he wrote: "As to quantity, it is foolish to suppose that we are incapable of distinguishing a long vowel from a short one, or that we are mentally debarred from ascertaining how many consonants intervene between one vowel and the next."⁶⁰ Some years later, writing to Mary Barnard, Pound admitted that he was unsure whether quantity could ever be incorporated into English prosody:

I simply do not KNOW enough about question of quantity. I mean use IN english of greek supposed "rule." Keep on doing accented sapphics, if you like but also keep trying TOWARD the solution // can we in eng/ observe the measurements, short = short vowel and ONLY one consonant before the next vowel.

Can it be done without paralyzing the speech altogether.⁶¹

In an earlier letter he had written her: "If you really learn to write proper quantitative sapphics in the amurikan langwidge I shall love and adore you all the days of my life."⁶² In these three statements, Pound overlooks the crucial question of whether quantitative Sapphics could be audible in English, even if technically "correct." Pound's own "Apparuit" approximates the Greek Sapphic

59 Pound (1954), 12.

60 Pound (1914), 140.

61 Letter to Barnard, May 1935; quoted in Barnard (1984), 80. Italics, capitalization, and punctuation original.

62 Letter of December 2, 1933, quoted in Barnard (1984), 56; spelling original.

strophe through accentual, not quantitative, meter.⁶³ To take the poem's second and third lines as examples, an accentual reading yields recognizable Sapphic meter: "thée, a márvel, cårven in sùbtlē stúff, a / pòrtent. Lîfe dîed dówn in the lāmp and flickered." But if we follow the rules of Greek quantity, as Pound urged Barnard to do, the poem includes too many long syllables, some of which fall in the wrong places: "thêe, a mårvêl, cårven ìn sùbtlê stuff, a / pòrtênt. Lîfe dîed dówn ìn the lāmp ānd flickêred."⁶⁴ Despite some critics' over-enthusiastic declarations that "Apparuit" is quantitative, this meter functions as a pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables, not as quantitative verse.⁶⁵

4 Sources

Aldington and Pound did not, as it happens, pull their theories about Greek meter entirely out of thin air. They drew on at least two sources, one ancient and one modern, although they misunderstood both these sources.

In 1925, Aldington refers explicitly to an ancient authority, the second-century CE author Hephaestion, to support the assertion that there was an ancient Greek form of free verse. "The clearest and most satisfactory definition (or rather analysis) of free verse is to be found in the *Encheiridion peri metron* of

63 Pound (1912a).

64 The double "f" of "stuff" and the "ck" of "flickered" are mere spelling conventions, not truly double consonants.

65 Powell (1979), 12, n. 25: "Pound is *not*, of course, writing quantitative verse, an *impossibility* in English. Rather, he adapts rhythmic shapes generated by Greek quantitative verse to the capabilities of English *accentual* techniques," emphasis original. Powell's article is an invaluable examination of Pound's adaptations of classical meters. Carne-Ross ((1990), 136) suggests that Pound used quantity to underline the clearly accentual basis of his Sapphics. The difference between true quantitative Sapphics and Pound's adaptations of classical meters unfortunately eludes some critics; for instance, Regier ((1980), 322) claims that "enforcing the rules of classical prosody, implicating quantity instead of stress, 'Apparuit' has virtually perfect Sapphic form." Even Adams ((1997), 68), in his otherwise excellent book, goes astray over this point. Just as he mistakenly calls Watts's form of Sapphics "an accentual replication of classical sapphics" (which as we have seen is incorrect), so too he says that "Apparuit" is "a delicate attempt to reproduce the quantitative sapphic stanza in English quantities." But, of course, it is not – if we take Pound at his word that by quantitative Sapphics he meant the Greek system of "measurements, short = short vowel and ONLY one consonant before the next vowel;" Barnard (1984), 80. Rosenblitt's discussion of "Apparuit" ((2013), 188–91) recognizes that "Pound's approach to quantities is essentially intuitive" and that he does not follow the Greek rule; she calls the poem "on the whole [...] an unappealing performance."

Hephaestion, a grammarian of Alexandria, who has left the only extant complete treatise on Greek metres."⁶⁶ Aldington's identification of Hephaestion as a "grammarian of Alexandria" could mislead the unwary into assuming Hephaestion's date was BCE. Indeed, Aldington himself may have been so misled; the text he used, edited by T. F. Barham, stated that Hephaestion was "a scholar of Alexandria who flourished in the second century," without specifying *which* second century was meant.⁶⁷

Aldington quotes Hephaestion: "We call polyschematista all such metres as admit of a plurality of form in a manner not determined by any certain rule, but variously, according to the choice of the poets who used them."⁶⁸ Aldington then continues:

Among the various types quoted and analysed by Hephaestion I find the Apolelymena, "such poems as are written at random and without prescribed metre," and the Metrika Atkata [sic], "such as have neither similarity to each other nor *anakyklesis*," which I take to mean that the "feet" vary at the will of the poet and that there is no repetition of the rhythmic pattern. Unfortunately, the poems referred to by Hephaestion have either perished or exist only in fragments, which the curious will find in the excellent Teubner edition of the early Greek lyric poets. I imagine that these Melic poets were all musicians, and that their art was something between those of a bard, a trouvère, and an improvisatore [...]

It seems certain that the Apolelymena disappeared with the early lyric school, though the choruses of the Attic dramatists appear to be derived from them. (This is a matter for experts to decide.) [...] I think it not over-straining the evidence to say that something strangely similar to modern free verse at least in form existed in the Greek islands about the sixth century BC.⁶⁹

Although he does not say so, Aldington apparently read the *Encheiridion* only in translation. The quotations he gives are directly taken from Barham's 1843 translation.⁷⁰ Barham says that, with a few variations, he used Gaisford's

66 Aldington (1925), 36.

67 Barham (1843), x. On Aldington's use of Barham's text, see below. Gentili and Lomiento ((2008), 79) note that Hephaestion clearly "drew upon the authoritative theories of Alexandrian scholars."

68 Aldington (1925), 36.

69 Aldington (1925), 37.

70 Barham (1843). Aldington's quotations are from pages 199 and 205; the quotations about *apolelymena* and *metrika atakta* actually come from the beginning of the fragmentary

edition of the Greek text; this probably refers to the 1832 Leipzig edition, which was available in the British Museum Reading Room.⁷¹ Whether Aldington looked at Gaisford's Greek text or relied entirely on Barham, he has seriously misunderstood the nature of the evidence he cites here.

First, Aldington garbles the possible dates. Hephaestion's only example of a writer of *apolelumena* is Timotheus. Since Timotheus wrote in the late *fifth* century BCE, his works cannot be taken as evidence for verse forms of the *sixth* century BCE, nor can the choruses of Attic drama which preceded Timotheus have "derived from" his work. For the *metrika atakta*, Hephaestion cites an epigram by Simonides, who wrote at the end of the sixth and beginning of the fifth century BCE. This is closer to Aldington's desired dates, but hardly supports the claim that such verse was widespread among the "early Greek lyric poets."

But confusion of dates apart, could Aldington be correct that by *apolelumena* and *metrika atakta* Hephaestion means something similar to modern "free verse"? Hephaestion gives very little information beyond the bare statements that Aldington quotes. But there is no uncertainty among scholars about what these terms mean. *Apolelumena* refers to poetry that does not feature metrical responsion between strophe and antistrophe or between stanzas, and *metrika atakta* to poems written in a variety of meters.

On the *apolelumena*, Hephaestion writes:

Ἀπολελυμένα δέ, ἃ εἰκῇ γέγραπται καὶ ἄνευ μέτρου ὠρισμένου, οἳοί εἰσιν οἱ νόμοι οἱ κιθαρωδικοὶ Τιμοθέου.

[And loose (are poems) which have been written at random and without a determined metre, such as are Timotheus' tunes for singing to the cithara.]⁷²

Van Ophuijsen's notes on this terminology make it very clear that the point is lack of responsion – whether internal or external – not complete ametricity.⁷³

Peri poëmatōn, which Barham prints as Part II of his edition of the "Encheiridion." The only alteration Aldington has made is to adjust the spelling of *polyschematista* and *anakyklesis*, from Barham's *poluskhematista* and *anakuklehsis*; Barham uses an idiosyncratic transliteration throughout, which he explains on pp. ix–x.

71 Barham (1843), vi. Gaisford's edition is Gaisford (1832), British Library shelfmark General Reference Collection 623.f.5. Barham dedicated his book to Gaisford.

72 Text and translation from Van Ophuijsen (1993), 823.

73 "Loose (*ἀπολελυμένα* 64.24) is intended to be ambivalent between an inner dissolution, technically the absence of internal responsion, and of an independence from any verse in the context, the absence of external responsion;" Van Ophuijsen (1993), 823. See further Van Ophuijsen (1993), 824.

Gentili and Lomiento agree: the *apolelumena* were "astrophic compositions, 'free' or 'released' from responsion."⁷⁴

Concerning *metrika atakta*, Hephaestion writes:

Μετρικὰ δὲ ἄτακτά ἐστιν, ἅπερ μέτρῳ μὲν γέγραπταί τινι, οὔτε δὲ ὁμοιότητα ἔχει πρὸς ἄλληλα οὔτε ἀνακύκλησιν.

[Of unordered *metra* are just (those poems) which have been written in some metre, but have neither similarity (of the *metra*) to each other nor cyclic recurrence.]⁷⁵

Van Ophuijsen comments that "there is nothing special about the metra in themselves, it is just that they do not add up to any regular and thereby predictable structure."⁷⁶ Gentili and Lomiento gloss the *atakta* as "compositions in which different meters alternate without following a definite order."⁷⁷ In short, Aldington was mistaken in thinking that Hephaestion provided evidence for ancient forms corresponding to twentieth-century "free verse."

There is good reason to think that both Aldington and Pound relied on a particular modern text to support their views of ancient "free verse." In "The Tradition," just before his reference to "conventional imbecility," Pound gives a clue to a modern text on which he relied for support of his views of *vers libre*:

As to the tradition of *vers libre*: Jannaris in his study of the Melic poets comes to the conclusion that they composed to the feel of the thing, to the cadence, as have all good poets since. He is not inclined to believe that they were much influenced by discussions held in Alexandria some centuries after their deaths.⁷⁸

As Beyers has pointed out, this must refer to A. N. Jannaris's *An Historical Greek Grammar*, a massive but deeply flawed work that espouses several idiosyncratic and ultimately untenable theories about the historical development of the Greek language.⁷⁹ Most notably, Jannaris denies the validity of the "Erasmian"

74 Gentili and Lomiento (2008), 79. See also Csapo's ((2004), 229) statement that *apolelumenos* "signified the 'liberation' of the verse from formal structures such as strophic responsion."

75 Van Ophuijsen (1993), 825.

76 Van Ophuijsen (1993), 826.

77 Gentili and Lomiento (2008), 79.

78 Pound (1914), 5.

79 Beyers (2001), 20, referring to Jannaris (1897).

pronunciation of ancient Greek, and claims that the ancient language was pronounced essentially in the same way as the modern language.

Jannaris was far from alone in objecting to the pronunciation of Greek used in nineteenth-century British schools, and the question of the appropriate way to pronounce ancient Greek remains contentious among modern Greek speakers. Some nineteenth-century British classicists argued for using a pronunciation that would allow students of classical Greek to converse with modern Greeks with some measure of ease. However, even the most passionate British philhellenes such as John Stuart Blackie and Lord Bute did not claim, as Jannaris did, that Greek had *always been pronounced* as the modern Greeks pronounce it.⁸⁰ It is true that Blackie, in a polemical moment, refers to the pronunciation in British schools, which was partially based on the Erasmian pronunciation, as “that capricious and arbitrary method [...] destitute alike of authority and of character” and calls it a “vicious habit.”⁸¹ But in his fuller treatment of the subject, Blackie makes it quite plain that he has no doubt whatsoever that the pronunciations of eta and omega were differentiated *by length* from those of epsilon and omicron, and that itacism, while it clearly reaches back at least as far as Byzantine Greek, cannot be ascribed to the pronunciation of the classical age, let alone the Homeric.⁸²

Jannaris went much further than Blackie in his wholesale rejection of the Erasmian pronunciation. This required him to concoct a very strange theory to explain why the Greek alphabet has separate letters for sounds that, he argues, were always identical in pronunciation.⁸³ His theory about the development

80 Bute brought Jannaris to St. Andrews as a lecturer in post-classical and modern Greek in 1896; see the fascinating account of Macrides (1992).

81 Blackie (1853), 6.

82 E.g., concerning Dionysius of Halicarnassus' discussion of vowel sounds, he calls it “abundantly obvious” that “the itacism of the modern Greeks did not exist [...] in the time of this writer;” later he comments: “I at once admit that the prevalence of the slender sound of *i* (*ee*), is a corruption from the original purity of Hellenic vocalization”: Blackie (1852), 28, 42–3. See also his comment ((1853), 18, footnote) that “The modern Greeks, as is well known, pay no consistent regard to the quantity of syllables, as long or short [...] There is not the slightest reason, however, why we should allow them to impose this oversight on us.”

83 These ideas permeate Jannaris's work, but see especially 27, 31–62 (on the Erasmian pronunciation), and Appendices I (on Accent, 507–18) and II (on Quantity, 519–40, esp. 523–7, on meter). Overall, Jannaris's work is conspicuous for its absence from serious scholarship on the history and development of the Greek language. Sandys's three-volume work on classical scholarship mentions him only in passing, in a footnote ((1908), 375, n. 7): “For a conspectus of the existing forms of modern Greek, cp. Jannaris, *Modern Greek Dictionary* (1895), p. xiii. This scholar has also produced an ‘Ancient Greek Lexicon for Modern Greeks,’ and a ‘Historical Greek Grammar’ (1897).” Jannaris's modern admirers

of the alphabet in turn led him, as we shall see, to equally idiosyncratic views about Greek meter and the origins and meaning of "quantity." There seems little doubt that Jannaris's highly eccentric work, and in particular its untenable ideas about Greek meter, had a great influence on Pound's views of ancient poetry.

According to Aldington, Pound's style of reading was to zero in on a few paragraphs rather than to read a whole book carefully and with attention: "I have often watched him with books. He pecks at them, like an intelligent cockerel, and having discovered a grain of wheat, crows over it as the pith and essence of the book."⁸⁴ This appears to be what Pound did with Jannaris's massive *History*. Despite Pound's statement, Jannaris wrote no book on the Melic poets; Pound almost certainly simply skimmed Jannaris's Appendices on Accent and Quantity and came away with a fairly grave misunderstanding of what was, to begin with, a deeply idiosyncratic and factually untenable theory about Greek poetry. Most scholars have not commented on Pound's reference to Jannaris; those who do, have mistakenly assumed that Pound is citing an actual "study" of Melic poetry and that this study says what Pound claims it does.⁸⁵

Pound's statement that Jannaris thought the poets "composed to the feel of the thing, to the cadence" grossly oversimplifies Jannaris's very complicated (and factually incorrect) discussion, but of course has a grain of truth in it; Greek poets probably *did* compose to "the feel of the thing," as do most poets in any tradition. But the "feel of the thing" in their case was based on quantitative verse, on alternations of audibly long and short syllables in elaborate and recognizable patterns. Pound derides as "conventional imbecility" the assumption that Greek (and Latin) poets paid attention to regular quantitative meter,

do not attempt to justify his views on pronunciation; see, e.g., Pappas ((2011), 259, reviewing Caragounis (2010)), who identifies the "rejection of the 'Erasmian pronunciation'" as among the "serious shortcomings" of Jannaris's work. Giannakis ((2010), 302–3), who obviously greatly admires Jannaris's overall achievement, calls his rejection of the Erasmian pronunciation "an unfortunate decision" and lays out some of "the difficulties in explaining a number of phenomena of the phonology of Ancient Greek" into which this rejection leads Jannaris.

84 Letter to Henry Slonimsky dated September 21, 1941, quoted in Doyle (1989), 210.

85 Adams ((1977), 101) introduces Pound's reference to Jannaris by saying that "Even the Greeks had no rigid rules for quantity," which apart from being false is an exaggeration of Pound's claim ("they composed to the feel of the thing, to the cadence"), and he does not comment on Pound's assessment of Jannaris's argument, let alone discuss the crucial point of whether Jannaris was correct. Beyers takes Jannaris's theories at face value, without questioning whether those theories were sound, or even tenable. Moreover, he incorrectly implies that Horrocks endorses Jannaris: Beyers (2001), 20, citing Horrocks (1997), 6 – a passage that discusses modern Greek and *katharevousa* and has no bearing whatsoever on Jannaris's claims about ancient poets.

but in fact this “conventional” assumption merely acknowledges the metrical patterns that are, unquestionably, present in ancient poetry, including in the works of some of the poets Pound admired most; neither Sappho nor Catullus ever composed anything that could conceivably be called non-metrical, and their meters were quantitative. Their rhythms, of course, were varied, complex, and subtle, but those rhythms worked within the structure of regular meter.

Both Pound and Aldington were probably influenced by Jannaris’s very idiosyncratic theory of how quantitative meter arose. First, Jannaris claimed that the Greek accent was dynamic – that is, a stress accent, and not pitch-based; and second, he claimed that quantity arose *from* this supposed stress accent, rather than being independent of it: “stress-accent and quantity go hand in hand [...] so that a stressed syllable is of necessity drawn longer than an unstressed syllable. In other words, quantity (prosodic length) appears as the *result* of stress-accent.”⁸⁶ Jannaris went further and denied any original distinction of pronunciation between short and long vowels. To explain the existence of eta and omega, he declared that the (probably legendary) “Peisistratean recension” at Athens in fact consisted not in regularizing the text of Homer in any way, but rather in creating “a rational and practicable system of normal spelling calculated to facilitate the reading at school of the national or standard texts,” and conjures up from his imagination a whole cadre of pre-Peisistratean Athenian “schoolmasters” who invented eta, omega, and the diphthongs to preserve a verse form that, he claims, had originally been accentual-stress-based, not quantity-based.⁸⁷ To say that this claim is bizarre is to put it mildly; to say that it is unfounded merely states the factually obvious.⁸⁸ But it – or a misunderstanding of its implications – may well lie behind Pound’s, Aldington’s, and others’ claims that Greek poets, even those working in the most regular and fixed of meters, were actually writing “free verse.” If, as Jannaris seemed to claim, the standard metrical analyses of Greek poetry were based on artificial systems developed by scholars to aid in reading old texts and were not integral components arising from the observable properties of the poems themselves, then it became possible to discard those metrical patterns out of hand and, in fact, to claim that ancient poets, too, wrote free verse. Jannaris’s ideas about

86 Jannaris (1897), 519; emphasis original. For his discussions of stress and musical accent, see 69–71; 507–19.

87 Jannaris (1897), 36–57, and esp. Appendix II (Quantity), 519–40. Jannaris’s ideas about the “genesis of quantity” from a hypothetical stress-accent are on pp. 528–530. The Peisistratean recension quotation appears on p. 530. For references to the supposed “Athenian schoolmasters,” see *i.a.* 40, 528, and 530.

88 Blackie’s robust statement ((1853), 19), “we know perfectly well that the poetry of the ancients was not composed on accentual principles at all,” is a useful antidote.

the development of quantity, the alphabet, and meter were wrong; but his assertions offered so useful a validation to the early proponents of free verse in English that the latter apparently were unwilling to examine too closely the evidence for his arguments.⁸⁹

5 Poets and True Poetry

Despite their scorn for Romanticism and their avowed desire to create hard, spare poetry, the Imagists retained a fundamentally Romantic view of the poet as a specially privileged being, one who (they thought) could divine "true" poetic practice and meaning in the works of other poets, across eras, cultures, and languages. Aldington and Pound, in particular, had nothing but scorn for scholars, ancient as well as modern. Pound advises the aspiring poet to disregard the work of any critic who is not a poet: "Pay no attention to the criticism of men who have never themselves written a notable work. Consider the discrepancies between the actual writing of the Greek poets and dramatists, and the theories of the Graeco-Roman grammarians, concocted to explain their metres."⁹⁰ Pound blithely (and characteristically) assumes that he, as a poet, knows more about ancient poets' metrical practice than did native speakers of those poets' languages who lived only a few centuries later; and he equally blithely assumes that if he does not understand the scansions based on the works of "Graeco-Roman grammarians," then it is the grammarians' theories that must be at fault, not his own understanding. While Aldington would criticize Pound for "schoolboy howlers" in the *Homage to Sextus Propertius*,⁹¹ at other times he no less than Pound vehemently claimed that only a poet could grasp another poet's essence. Although they did not go so far as Robert Graves and insist that the true poet had an actual mystical relationship with a Muse, still Pound and Aldington both relied quite heavily on a quasi-mystical view of the Poet that was no less crucial for never being fully articulated. And this sense of the Poet's special status, a status to which academic scholarship

89 Cf. Beyers ((2001), 22): "Jannaris provided the Moderns with a theoretical justification for the idea that poetic rhythm is created solely from the poet's sense of rhythm, as well as for the corollary that the traditional rules of versification are arbitrary strictures." It bears repeating that Beyers himself assumes far too quickly that, first, Pound had correctly understood Jannaris and, second, that Jannaris's theories were in fact tenable.

90 Pound (1913), 201.

91 Correcting Pound's "night dogs" (for *nocte canes*), Aldington ((1941), 137–8) says loftily: "Of course it means 'thou singest by night.'" Actually, the tense of *canes* is future, not present; Aldington corrects Pound's howler with an error of his own.

was antithetical, permeated their views not only of poetic content but also of poetic form, including ancient metrics. Both Pound and Aldington freely admitted that their own grasp of ancient Greek was faulty; and yet each also thought that he “knew” how Greek meter worked better than scholars who had devoted decades to the study of the topic. This antipathy to scholarship (which both men had evinced in their university days) meshed seamlessly with their admiration for ancient Greece and their unshakeable belief that “true poets” in the ancient world wrote the same *kind* of poetry, even in its metrical form, as the poetry the Imagists were creating in their enthusiastic turn away from “hidebound” nineteenth-century practices. Alongside their aggressive iconoclasm and their forceful insistence that they were creating new forms, they no less forcefully insisted that they were resurrecting, or rediscovering, poetic forms that reached back to the very beginning of European poetry. Their peculiar brand of classical reception was based on a mistaken view of Greek meter and was largely dependent on a hazy and highly romanticized view of Hellas – but seldom has a misapprehension of historical facts been so fruitful for the creation of a whole movement in literature. Through their interaction with old poetics, however flawed and idiosyncratic that interaction was, Pound and Aldington did indeed “make it new.”

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The Exalting Alliance

Presocratic Poetics in Twentieth-Century France

Alison James

À DEUX MÉRITES: Héraclite, Georges de La Tour, je vous sais gré d'avoir de longs moments poussé dehors de chaque pli de mon corps singulier ce leurre: la condition humaine incohérente [...] d'avoir rendu agile et recevable ma dislocation [...].

[TWO MERITS: Heraclitus, Georges de La Tour, I am grateful to you for having for long moments thrust out from each fold of my singular body this enticement: the incoherent human condition [...] for having rendered agile and admissible my displacement [...]]

RENÉ CHAR, *Furor and Mystery*, "Partage formel," Fragment 9¹



1 Introduction

René Char's (1907–1988) idiosyncratic pairing of Heraclitus of Ephesus (fl. c.500 BCE) and the seventeenth-century painter Georges de La Tour (1593–1652) may serve as an apt introduction to twentieth-century French poetry's fascination with Presocratic thought. In the above fragment from the sequence of prose aphorisms "Formal Share" [Partage formel] (written in 1941–1942, published in *They Alone Remain* [Seuls demeurent] in 1945), the association of the Ephesian thinker and the French painter captures the singular conjunction between poetry, philosophy, and visual figuration that will come to characterize much postwar French poetry. This direct reference to Heraclitus, the first of many in Char's work, occurs at the moment of the German occupation of France, when Char led a Resistance unit under the code names Captain Alexandre and Hypnos. For Char, writing during these dark times, Heraclitus

1 Char (1983), 157; Char (2010), 108–9. I am indebted to Mark Payne for the conversations and co-teaching experience that inspired many of the readings in this essay. Special thanks should also go to Polina Tambakaki for her invaluable feedback and suggestions.

is the philosopher and poet of both difference and reconciliation, dislocation and dwelling, duality and resemblance. He signifies an approach to contrasts analogous to La Tour's pictorial organization of light and obscurity, notably in the depiction of scenes lit by a single flame.² Char's Fragment 9 indicates that Heraclitus stands for a certain mode of relation to the real, as well as to the poetic image as a mode of both representation and knowledge. For Char Heraclitus exemplifies a certain kind of humanism – one that confronts the “dislocated” human condition with its dangers and possibilities and seeks hope in the darkness. Less “Heraclitus the Obscure” than a chiaroscuro figure, the ancient philosopher who affirmed the unity of day and night³ offers a way of thinking that is both appealing and perilous.

The literary influence of Heraclitus is of course not limited to French poetry. We need only think of the two epigraphs that preface T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets* (1935–1942): drawn from Hermann Diels's collection *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker* (first published in 1903),⁴ these phrases contrast the unity of the *logos* with multiplicity (of movement, of ways of thinking).⁵ Nevertheless, Heraclitus and the Presocratics more generally take on an especially prominent role in twentieth-century France, as mediators of a dialogue between philosophy and poetry. While their cultural influence is often associated with that of Martin Heidegger (especially given the latter's friendship with Char after 1955), it has a longer history.

In the nineteenth century, in the wake of, and in competition with, German “Science of Antiquity” [Altertumswissenschaft], French scholars had attempted to establish their country's Hellenist credentials, looking back to sixteenth-century classical humanism to argue for the impact of ancient Greek on the

2 Char discovered La Tour in 1934 when he attended an exhibition on *Painters of Reality in 17th-Century France* at the Musée de l'Orangerie in Paris (Char (1983), 1246). Fragment 178 of the wartime notebook *Leaves of Hypnos* [Feuillets d'Hypnos] describes a color reproduction of La Tour's painting “Prisoner” [Prisonnier], and finds in its depiction of human dialogue a remedy against the “Hitlerian shadows” [les ténèbres hitlériennes] (Char (1983), 218; Char (2010), 193–5) (the painting is now known as “Job Ridiculed by his Wife” [Job raillé par sa femme]). Char's prose poem “Madeleine with the Vigil-Lamp” [Madeleine à la veilleuse] in the section “The Narrative Fountain” [La Fontaine narrative] (1947) of *Furor and Mystery* [Fureur et mystère] again evokes a painting by La Tour, associating the image of the woman, the presence of light, and the flame that will reveal “the impossible solution” [l'impossible solution] (Char (1983), 276; Char (2010), 306–7).

3 Heraclitus, Fragment 57 Diels-Kranz (henceforth D-K).

4 The ninth edition, in 1960, was revised by Walther Kranz.

5 Eliot (1974), 175: τοῦ λόγου δ' ἐόντος ξυνοῦ ζώουσιν οἱ πολλοὶ ὡς ἰδίαν ἔχοντες φρόνησιν [although the *logos* is common, most people live as if they had their own private understanding]; ὁδὸς ἄνω κάτω μία καὶ ὡυτή [the road up and the road down are one and the same]. Heraclitus, Fragments 2 and 60 D-K; McKirahan (2010), 112 and 118. [Greek original added by P. T., here and in subsequent notes.]

development of French language and literature.⁶ During the years of the Third Republic (1870–1940), even as educational reforms somewhat diminished the place of ancient languages in the secondary school curriculum,⁷ the works of the Presocratics became more widely accessible in French translation. Maurice Solovine's translation of Heraclitus in 1918⁸ was followed by several academic studies that caught the Surrealists' attention in the 1920s. In the 1930s and 1940s, the philosopher Gaston Bachelard turned to the Presocratics' elemental conception of the natural world in order to analyze the human imagination of matter and its movement: fire in *The Psychoanalysis of Fire* [La Psychanalyse du feu] (1938), water in *Water and Dreams* [L'Eau et les rêves] (1942), air in *Air and Dreams* [L'Air et les songes] (1943), and earth in *Earth and Reveries of Repose* [La Terre et les rêveries du repos] (1948). The years following the Second World War saw a flurry of translations and studies of the Presocratics, including those by the Hellenist scholar and translator Yves Battistini (a friend of Char's) (1948 and 1955), and others by Jean Beaufret (1955), Abel Jeannière (1959), Clémence Ramnoux (1959 and 1970), Kostas Axelos (1958), and Jean Bollack (1972, with Heinz Wismann). Even if the poets discussed in the present essay did not always read Greek – Char did not – they were often in close dialogue with these philosophers and translators. Heraclitus, Parmenides of Elea, and Empedocles of Acragas became the subject of competing philosophical readings, while the extant forms of their writings – especially the enigmatic fragments of Heraclitus – helped inspire a poetics of the aphorism.

Before Char, the poet Paul Valéry (1871–1945) had found inspiration – but also intellectual temptation – in Parmenides and other Eleatics, such as Zeno, fascinated by their denial of movement. Valéry's poem "The Graveyard by the Sea" [Le Cimetière marin], first published in 1920, draws on two of the paradoxes of Zeno, Parmenides' pupil, in order to explore the tension between motion and immobility, human finitude and the desire for infinity:

Zénon! Cruel Zénon! Zénon d'Élée!
 M'as-tu percé de cette flèche ailée
 Qui vibre, vole, et qui ne vole pas!
 Le son m'enfante et la flèche me tue!
 Ah! le soleil ... Quelle ombre de tortue
 Pour l'âme, Achille immobile à grands pas!

⁶ See, for instance, Eggers (1869).

⁷ Larnaudie (1992), 26.

⁸ Solovine (1918).

[Zeno, Zeno, cruel philosopher Zeno,
 Have you then pierced me with your feathered arrow
 That hums and flies, yet does not fly! The sounding
 Shaft gives me life, the arrow kills. Oh, sun! –
 Oh, what a tortoise-shadow to outrun
 My soul, Achilles' giant stride left standing!]

lines 121–6⁹

The poem casts Zeno's motionless arrow in flight, and his Achilles unable to overtake the tortoise, as figures of the dangerous desire to deny motion, and hence life, in the name of the absolute. Valéry's poem bears an epigraph from Pindar's *Pythian* 3: μή, φίλα ψυχά, βίον ἀθάνατον / σπεῦδε, τὰν δ' ἔμπρακτον ἄντλει μαχανάν [O my soul, do not aspire to immortal life, but exhaust the limits of the possible].¹⁰ Valéry leaves the phrase untranslated – as he also does for many Greek citations in his *Cahiers*, even as he complains of his own rudimentary knowledge of the language (by contrast with his familiarity with Latin).¹¹

Ending with a return to experience ("We must try to live!" [il faut tenter de vivre!], line 139), "The Graveyard by the Sea" dramatizes the temptation of immobility and the eventual acceptance of becoming, limitation, and mortality. In its passage from the immobile surface of the sea to the breaking waves that close the poem, Valéry might be said to stage the conflict between Parmenides' claim that being "is ungenerated and imperishable, whole, unique, steadfast, and complete,"¹² on the one hand, and Heraclitus' doctrine of universal flux, on the other. This opposition between Parmenides' being and Heraclitus' becoming is no doubt reductive, as the French philosopher Jean Beaufret will later insist, given that Heraclitus' thought in fact unites the notions of permanence and change: waters flow but the river remains the same.¹³ Nevertheless, the

9 Valéry (1957–1960), i.151; trans. by C. Day Lewis in Valéry (1950), 49.

10 Valéry (1957–1960), i.147; Pindar, *Pythian* 3.61–2. The same epigraph, but in the French translation of Aimé Puech, is used by Albert Camus for *The Myth of Sisyphus* [Le Mythe de Sisyphe] (1942); my English version is taken from Justin O'Brien's translation (Camus (2012), 2). On the reception of Pindar's *Pythian* 3, see Briand (2011). Briand emphasizes the role of Hölderlin, who translated Pindar, in transmitting Pindar to philosophical and poetic modernity.

11 Larnaudie (1992), 21; see also Tambakaki, this volume.

12 Parmenides, *On Nature* [Περὶ φύσεως], Fragment 8.3–4 D-K: ὥς ἀγένητον ἐὼν καὶ ἀνώλεθρόν ἐστιν, / ἐστὶ γὰρ οὐλομελές τε καὶ ἀτρεμές ἥδ' ἀτέλεστον (trans. Richard McKirahan (2010), 147 with n. 11).

13 Beaufret (1973), 39–40; Heraclitus, Fragment 12 D-K: ποταμοῖσι τοῖσιν αὐτοῖσιν ἐμβαίνουσιν ἕτερα καὶ ἕτερα ὕδατα ἐπιρρεῖ [On those stepping into rivers staying the same other and other waters flow]; Graham (2010), 159.

opposition between being and becoming is essential in poetry, which attempts to negotiate the tension between permanence and mutability, or between the desire for stability and the inevitability of movement. In this respect, Valéry and others turn to the Presocratics as fundamental thinkers of the human existential condition.¹⁴

Whereas Valéry develops his own particular form of classicism,¹⁵ the poetry of Char marks an important turning point in the dialogue between poetry and ancient philosophy in France. Following in his footsteps, the poets associated with the poetry journal *L'Éphémère* (The Ephemeral, 1967–1972) take up certain elements of this philosophical poetics. At stake is an ambivalent relationship to the poetic image, partly in reaction to the Surrealist conception of the image as at once a clash and a fusion of opposites. The problem of the image then encounters the “anti-Platonic” dimension of Yves Bonnefoy’s (1923–2016) poetry, where Image and Idea are simultaneously the unavoidable object of all thought, and a double threat to poetic presence in the world.

For French poets writing in the postwar period, the Presocratics (particularly Heraclitus and Parmenides) offer a way of understanding figural language as central to the possibilities of thought. The Presocratics are situated in an intermediate space, after the emergence of a discourse on nature that is distinct from myth, but before the separation between philosophical discourse and poetic utterance.¹⁶ As such, they are figures who authorize poetry’s claim to attain or at least approximate truth. Paying special (but not exclusive) attention to the work of Char and Bonnefoy as emblematic cases, this essay will sketch out the genealogy of a Presocratic French poetics that simultaneously aspires to unite poetry and thought, and struggles against the mirages of language, abstraction, and conceptual thinking. The abstraction of the Platonic *eidos*, paired with the *eidolon* as a doubling of the real, becomes a snare for poetry, against which a number of poets set a Heraclitean emphasis on the ephemeral.

14 This is not to neglect the rational, Cartesian dimension of Valéry’s thought. On a more humorous note, in his drama *Mon Faust* (1945), the shadowy and cobweb-ridden philosopher’s corner of Faust’s library includes an apocryphal book by Descartes and an edition of Heraclitus’ “complete works” in “ten in-folio volumes.” Valéry (1957–1960), ii:366.

15 On Valéry’s Hellenism, which has both a philosophical and a mythological dimension, see Larnaudie (1992).

16 Maurice Blanchot ((1993), 86) follows Clémence Ramnoux when he describes Heraclitus as one of “those who invented the discourses of nature,” turning away from the sacred and thus operating a “decisive deepening of human language.” Jean-Pierre Vernant ((1962), 98 and 115–16) also describes the origins of “Greek reason” as a turn away from the sacred to a new mode of reflection on nature, but his focus is on Anaximander as the thinker whose prose writing and geometrical account of the cosmos emerges from the logic of the *polis*.

2 “The Harmony of Bow and Lyre”: Surrealist Fusion

This poetic turn to the Presocratics, and especially to Heraclitus, must be understood in the light of an ongoing debate on the function and the limits of poetic images. When the Surrealists adopt the poet Pierre Reverdy's (1889–1960) Modernist definition of the poetic image, they give it a twist. In 1918 Reverdy had defined the poetic image as arising “from the coming together of two realities more or less distanced from each other” [du rapprochement de deux réalités plus ou moins éloignées],¹⁷ distinguishing image from comparison but insisting on the accuracy of the resulting association. For Reverdy, the image combines surprise and precision, and appeals to the mind to grasp the connection through a “voluntary act of attention” [un acte d'attention volontaire].¹⁸ The Surrealists take up the idea of the coming together of realities, but they reject the notion of mental discipline in favor of unconscious associations. André Breton (1896–1966), in his first surrealist manifesto of 1924, argues that Reverdy's own most powerful images, such as “The world goes back into a sack” [le monde rentre dans un sac] must have emerged spontaneously and involuntarily, along with exemplary Surrealist images such as Breton's own, “On the bridge the dew with the head of a tabby cat lulls itself to sleep” [Sur le pont la rosée à tête de chatte se berçait].¹⁹ The Surrealist image is not always a metaphor or a simile but often a composite figure, comparable to the results of the “exquisite corpse” game. The Surrealist poetics of the image comes to be exemplified by Paul Éluard's (1895–1952) simile “The earth is blue like an orange” [La terre est bleue comme une orange], which seems to undo the basic rhetorical principle of the simile.²⁰ In fact, the coming together of earth and orange operates not in a completely arbitrary manner but through a synesthetic displacement of attributes, from form to color.

Leaving aside critical debates over the precise operations of figurative language, the main point here is that Breton, initially inspired by Reverdy, Freud, and Lautréamont, comes to conceive of the image, and indeed of the Surrealist project in general, in dialectical terms, as the clash and synthesis of opposites. Breton's second manifesto (1929), while situating Surrealism in the wake of “the ‘colossal abortion’ of the Hegelian system,”²¹ also seems to advocate the extension of the dialectical method to life in general. Breton posits that

17 In “L'Image” (1918), *Nord-Sud* 13; Reverdy (2010), i.495; trans. in Caws (2013), xx.

18 In “La Fonction poétique” (1950), *Mercur de France*; Reverdy (2010), ii.1272 (my translation).

19 Breton (1969), 36 and 38. Reverdy's phrase is from “L'Ombre du mur” and Breton's from “Au regard des divinités.”

20 Éluard (1966), 153 (from the collection *Love, Poetry* [L'Amour la poésie]).

21 Breton (1969), 140.

“there exists a certain point in the mind where life and death, the real and the imaginary, the past and the future, the communicable and the incommunicable, the high and the low, cease to be perceived as contradictions.”²² The Surrealists thus adopt an ambivalent Hegelianism, associating *surréalité* with the Hegelian absolute while also struggling with Hegel’s ultimate subordination of the image to the Idea. In the years following Jean Wahl’s 1929 study *The Unhappy Consciousness in Hegel’s Philosophy* [Le Malheur de la conscience dans la philosophie de Hegel] the Surrealists were “drawn to Hegel’s dialectical negations as a means of erasing the divisions between reality and the dream.”²³ What is at stake is nothing less than the transformation of the relationship between inner and outer, reason and unconscious thought, dream and reality. The divisions of thought, in this view, need to be overcome: dream and reality are one.

If Heraclitus is less present than Hegel in Surrealist writings, the former is nevertheless treated with less ambivalence, and is ultimately adopted as a Surrealist precursor. The October 1927 issue of *The Surrealist Revolution* [La Révolution surréaliste] contains two articles on Heraclitus: a reprinting of Fénelon’s 1726 account of the life and thought of Heraclitus; and a discussion by Louis Aragon (1897–1982) of recent commentaries on Heraclitus. Aragon’s article emphasizes the precariousness of Heraclitus’ text and the disconcerting aspects of his thought.²⁴ In *Communicating Vessels* [Les Vases communicants] (1932), Breton quotes Heraclitus in support of the possibility of bringing together opposing systems of thought: “as Heraclitus expressed it precisely: ‘Harmony of opposed tensions, like [that] of the bow and [that] of the lyre.’”²⁵ And in his “Prolegomena to a Third Surrealist Manifesto or Not” [Prolégomènes à un troisième manifeste du surréalisme ou non] (1942), Breton also lists the Ephesian among other proto-Surrealists.²⁶

For the Surrealists, Heraclitus offers one path to conceptualizing the harmony between different realms of experience, including the domains of poetic and political action, and they also tend to read him in the light of the Hegelian dialectic. As Jonathan Eburne has argued, Breton turns to Heraclitus in order

22 Breton (1969), 123.

23 Baugh (2003), 1. For a detailed overview of Hegel’s reception in France from 1800 onward, see Kelly (1992).

24 Fénelon (1927 [first pub. 1726]); Aragon (1927).

25 Breton (1990), 134. The reference is to Heraclitus, Fragment 51 D-K: οὐ ξυνιᾶσιν ὅκως διαφερόμενον ἑωυτῷ ὁμολογέει· παλίντροπος ἁρμονίη ὅκωσπερ τόξου καὶ λύρης. [They do not understand how, though at variance with itself, it agrees with itself. It is a backwards-turning attunement like that of the bow and the lyre (McKirahan (2010), 116)].

26 Breton (1969), 285.

to stabilize the theoretical grounds of Surrealism, and he tends to suppress Heraclitus' emphasis on conflict and strife in the encounter of opposites.²⁷ And not only opposites: as Breton observes in elaborating his theory of "communicating vessels," poets can always discover a relation between any two objects chosen at random. That is, any object can always represent anything else; "everything is potentially an image" [tout fait image].²⁸

3 "The Exalting Alliance of Contraries": Char, Heraclitus, and the Dislocated Image

Char was associated with the Surrealist group from the late 1920s to the mid-1930s, before distancing himself from the group. According to the archaeologist and historian Paul Veyne, it was via Hegel's *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History* [Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Weltgeschichte] that Char first discovered Heraclitus, in 1930.²⁹ Alain Gaubert also emphasizes the influence on Char of Hölderlin's and Nietzsche's readings of the Ephesian philosopher,³⁰ who would become a constant presence in Char's work.

Implicitly cited via the metaphor of fire in Char's Surrealist poetry of the 1930s,³¹ Heraclitus comes to the fore during the Resistance, when Char increasingly turns to fragmentary forms of notation and aphorism. From 1945 onward, Char's friendship with the Hellenist Yves Battistini (1922–2009) is the foundation for a sustained dialogue between philosophy and poetry, as evidenced in Char's preface to Battistini's 1948 translation of Heraclitus.³² With another friend, the writer Albert Camus (1913–1960) (to whom Char's wartime fragments *Leaves of Hypnos* [Feuillets d'Hypnos] (1946) are dedicated), Char launched the short-lived literary journal *Empédocle* in 1949, the other members of the editorial board being Albert Béguin, Guido Meister, and Jean Vagne. Eleven issues of *Empédocle* appeared between April 1949 and August 1950 and included texts by Greta Knutson-Tzara (a multilingual Swedish artist who was another key influence on Char), Georges Bataille, Maurice Blanchot, Jean Cayrol, Jacques Dupin, Julien Gracq, Francis Ponge, and others. For the French-Algerian Camus, the thought of the early Greek philosophers is connected to a sense

27 Eburne (2000), 185.

28 Breton (1990), 108–9; Breton (1992), ii.181.

29 Veyne (1990), 314–15.

30 Gaubert (1987), 42. Hölderlin also wrote *The Death of Empedocles* [Der Tod des Empedokles]; Hölderlin (2008).

31 See Seguin (1969), 329. For "ever-living fire" (πῦρ αἰζῶν), see Heraclitus, Fragment 30 D-K.

32 "Héraclite d'Éphèse" (1948); Char (1983), 720–1; see also below. Battistini (1948).

of place – specifically, to a Mediterranean sensibility that transcends national identity and contemporary geopolitics, offering an alternative to the nationalisms that had ravaged Europe and hope for a world in ruins.³³ Char's own attachment to Provence has much in common with Camus's universalizing conception of the solar Mediterranean and of a "Meridional thought" ("pensée de midi" or "pensée solaire") steeped in Hellenism.³⁴

At first glance, Char's fascination with Heraclitus seems consonant with the Surrealist emphasis on dialectical fusion, the harmony of opposites and the erasure of contradiction.³⁵ Yet Heraclitus affirms less the identity of opposites than their reciprocal dependence: "We must recognize that war is common, strife is justice, and all things happen according to strife and necessity."³⁶ In asserting the mutual necessity of day and night, summer and winter, war and peace, hunger and satiety, Heraclitus formulates the principles of an ontology governed by interconnectedness and transformation, process and conflict.³⁷ Strife between opposites must be perceived as part of a larger unity. This is what Char, in "Formal Share," calls the "exalting alliance of contraries":

Héraclite met l'accent sur l'exaltante alliance des contraires. Il voit en premier lieu en eux la condition parfaite et le moteur indispensable à produire l'harmonie. En poésie il est advenu qu'au moment de la fusion de ces contraires surgissait un impact sans origine définie dont l'action dissolvante et solitaire provoquait le glissement des abîmes qui portent de façon si antiphysique le poème.

[Heraclitus stresses the exalting alliance of contraries. He sees first of all in them the perfect condition and the indispensable motor for producing harmony. In poetry, it has happened that at the moment of fusion of these contraries there emerged an impact without definite origin whose dissolving and solitary action encouraged the slide of those abysses that bear up the poem in such an anti-physical fashion.]³⁸

33 See Pourgouris (2011), 42–52.

34 See Sharpe (2017), 242–68. "La Pensée de midi" is the title of a subchapter of Camus's *The Rebel* [L'Homme révolté] (1951). In an introductory text he prepared for a radio programme on Char, Camus opens with references to Heraclitus and Empedocles: Camus (2000), 191.

35 For a reading that insists on the continuity between Heraclitus and Surrealist coincidence, see Seguin (1969), 337.

36 Heraclitus, Fragment 80 D-K: εἰδέναι δὲ χρὴ τὸν πόλεμον ἑόντα ξυνόν, καὶ δίκην ἔριν, καὶ γινόμενα πάντα κατ' ἔριν καὶ χρεῶν; Graham (2010), 157.

37 For a list of the contraries in Heraclitus, see Ramnoux (1959), 11–14.

38 Char (1983), 139; Char (2010), 111 (translation modified).

Although the opening sentence of this fragment is often quoted as evidence of Char's attachment to the harmony of opposites, the passage is not an unconditional celebration of unity. Rather, it takes stock of the poetic risk associated with the fusion that may sweep poetry down into a space of undifferentiated unity, whereas the poem must be held aloft by an anti-gravitational force. The "abysses" of contradiction, in other words, must create a productive tension and not drag the poem down in a disastrous collapse. The poet must put a stop to the dangerous slide into the abysses "by the intervention either of a traditional element well proven, or the fire of a demiurge sufficiently miraculous to annul the trajectory from cause to effect" [en faisant intervenir, soit un élément traditionnel à raison éprouvée, soit le feu d'une démiurgie si miraculeuse qu'elle annule le trajet de cause à effet].³⁹ Through this measured or miraculous intervention, "the poet can then see the final result of these contraries – these punctual and tumultuous mirages –, their immanent lineage *personified*, poetry and truth being, as we know, synonymous" [Le poète peut alors voir les contraires – ces mirages ponctuels et tumultueux – aboutir, leur lignée immanente *se personnifier*, poésie et vérité, comme nous savons, étant synonymes].⁴⁰ Poetry then embodies a resolution that arises from the conflicting ground of contraries, without collapsing under the weight of their fusion.

Char thus places a set of conditions on the necessary encounter of contraries, whereby poetic energy provides a mysterious counterforce to the gravitational pull toward fusion. As Jean Starobinski notes, the function of poetry for Char is to "maintain the confrontation of opposites," via a dramatic contrast that unites a negative apprehension of what escapes us with the opening of horizons available for our contemplation.⁴¹ Éric Marty argues that, unlike Breton, whose definition of Surrealism implies a harmonious fusion of opposites, Char's poetry promotes a "conflictual dialogue of things" and favors asymmetrical oppositions.⁴² For Char, Heraclitus offers an alternative to both Hegelian dialectics and Surrealist poetics for conceptualizing a unity without consonance. This understanding of Heraclitus has a larger impact on post-Surrealist conceptions of the literary. For instance, it is with reference to both Heraclitus and Char that Blanchot later cites the "exalting alliance of contraries" as the definition of the literary work itself, rejecting Hegelian synthesis in favor of a space of unresolved tension, or "torn unity."⁴³

39 Char (1983), 159; Char (2010), 112–13.

40 Char (1983), 159; Char (2010), 112–13. Emphasis in the original.

41 Starobinski (1968), 14 (my translation).

42 Marty (1990), 97–8, 100 (my translation).

43 Blanchot (1982), 226. For a reading of Char through the lens of Blanchot, see Iyer (2001).

Char's pairing of "furor" [fureur] and "mystery" [mystère] provides one example of such an asymmetrical tension. The alternative terms appear in a fragment of "Formal Share": "Furor and mystery one then the other seduced and consumed him. After that, the year that ended his agony of saxifrage" [Fureur et mystère tour à tour le séduisirent et le consumèrent. Puis vint l'année qui acheva son agonie de saxifrage].⁴⁴ The saxifrage, the stone-breaking plant, suggests the emergence of a poetic voice that does not abolish the stony ground from which it arises. The stone that is both the obstacle and ground to growth can be related to the recurring image of the landslide [glissement] that symbolizes an ethical risk:

Terre mouvante, horrible, exquise et condition humaine hétérogène se saisissent et se qualifient mutuellement. La poésie se tire de la somme exaltée de leur moire.

[Moving, horrible, exquisite earth and the heterogeneous human condition take hold of each other and are mutually qualified. Poetry extracts itself from the exalted sum of their moire.]⁴⁵

Poetry emerges "anti-physically," in a movement of ascension, from the interfering patterns of the moire – from the antithetical conditions of the moving ground and the potential quicksand of the contradictory, "dislocated" human condition. Char's articulation and disarticulation of the poetic image reproduces the incoherence of the human condition while also expressing a hope for resolution. In the 1944 poem "Freedom" [La Liberté], political liberation emerges in the guise of a "swan on the wound" [cygne sur la blessure] presenting the enigmatic figure of a possible healing and uttering a word that is also, for the poet, "the canvas on which my breath was inscribed" [la toile où s'inscrivit mon souffle].⁴⁶ The uncertain path of the swan's arrival – "along this white line that might as easily mean dawn's release as the candlestick of twilight" [par cette ligne blanche pouvant tout aussi bien signifier l'issue de l'aube que le bougeoir du crépuscule]⁴⁷ – has the potential to signify both ending and beginning – day and night –, but the question remains suspended.

44 Char (1983), 158 (Fragment 13); Char (2010), 110–11.

45 Char (1983), 162 (Fragment 27); Char (2010), 116–17.

46 Char (1983), 148; Char (2010), 84–5.

47 Char (1983), 148; Char (2010), 84–5.

4 “The Poetry of Inspired Thought”: Char, Heraclitus, and Heidegger

In the light of his wartime experiences, Char’s turn to the Presocratics takes on an inescapable political dimension. Char’s 1945 re-edition of his influential 1934 poetry collection *The Hammer with No Master* [Le Marteau sans maître]⁴⁸ includes two epigraphs, both in translation from the original Greek: the first from Heraclitus, “One should also bear in mind the man who forgets where the road leads” [Il faut aussi se souvenir de celui qui oublie où mène le chemin]; the second from Empedocles, “I wept and wailed when I saw the unfamiliar place” [J’ai pleuré, j’ai sangloté à la vue de cette demeure inaccoutumée].⁴⁹ According to Battistini, these quotations define the opposite and twin poles of life and poetry, recognizing, on the one hand, the right to adventure and dream, and, on the other, the projection of poetry into contemporary tragedy.⁵⁰ Both phrases allude, via the figures of the wanderer and the exile (Empedocles’ exiled daemon), to a human condition of disorientation, displacement, and uncertainty.

Char’s preface to Battistini’s 1948 translation of Heraclitus, later republished in *Search for the Base and the Summit* [Recherche de la base et du sommet] (1955),⁵¹ characterizes the Ephesian philosopher as a thinker of human complexity, the epitome of freedom in thought, and a pessimist genius whose account of becoming combines fatalism with openness to the unexpected.⁵² For Char, Heraclitus is a philosopher of the human condition and of the “antistatic,”⁵³ but also a poetic model; even more than the other Presocratics, whose survival in the form of textual fragments is primarily accidental, Heraclitus deliberately opts for the aphorism, the gnomic utterance, and partial obscurity.⁵⁴ In his praise for Battistini, Char claims that the translator does justice both to Heraclitus’ philosophy and to his “poetry of inspired thought,” the content and form being inseparable:

48 Three poems from *The Hammer with No Master* were set to music by Pierre Boulez in 1953–1955, following his earlier settings of Char’s poems of *The Nuptial Countenance* [Le Visage nuptial] in 1946.

49 Char (1945), 9. Heraclitus, Fragment 71 D-K: μεμνήσθαι δὲ καὶ τοῦ ἐπιλανθανομένου ἥ ἡ ὁδὸς ἄγει; Graham (2010), 169. Empedocles, Fragment B 118 D-K: κλαῦσά τε καὶ κώκυσα ἰδῶν ἀσυνήθεα χώρον. Inwood (2001), 264–5.

50 Battistini (1968), 82.

51 See also above, pp. 176 and 181.

52 Char (1983), 720–1.

53 Lawler (1978), 34.

54 Seguin (1969), 338.

Disant juste, sur la pointe et dans le sillage de la flèche, la poésie court immédiatement sur les sommets, parce que Héraclite possède ce souverain pouvoir ascensionnel qui frappe d'ouverture et doue de mouvement le langage en le faisant servir à sa propre consommation.

[Speaking precisely, on the point and in the wake of the arrow, poetry immediately scales the heights, because Heraclitus possesses this sovereign ascending power that strikes open and bestows movement on language, by making it serve its own consummation.]⁵⁵

Again, we find the images of poetic ascension, opening, and movement so prevalent in Char's poetry, where the scaling of summits is never a final conquest but rather the opening up of more unknown territory.⁵⁶

The Presocratics are associated with this movement into the unknown, but also with the possibility of inhabiting the world. In a 1956 text dealing with another great figure of "exacting" thought (among the "great exactors" [grands astreignants] or the "substantial allies" [alliés substantiels], whom Char praises), Char positions Rimbaud as the successor to Heraclitus and Georges de La Tour, among those who "had constructed and shown which House, among all, man should inhabit: a dwelling both for breath and meditation" [avaient construit et montré quelle Maison entre toutes devait habiter l'homme: à la fois demeure pour le souffle et la méditation].⁵⁷ While the language here seems Heideggerian (recalling Heidegger's "Language is the house of Being" [die Sprache ist das Haus des Seins]),⁵⁸ it also echoes the Empedocles epigraph to *The Hammer with No Master*, transforming the philosopher's lament at encountering an "unfamiliar place" into a suggestive paradox. That is, poetry appears as the means of inhabiting the space of the unknown, constructing an "unfamiliar place." "Marry and do not marry your house" [épouse et n'épouse pas ta maison] orders Char in his wartime fragments *Leaves of Hypnos*.⁵⁹

It is a shared interest in Greek philosophy that also gives Heidegger a place among Char's "substantial allies." Their dialogue dates from the two men's first "conversation under the chestnut tree" in Ménilmontant, Paris, in 1955, in a meeting arranged by the philosopher Jean Beaufret, an immensely influential

55 Char (1983), 721 (my translation).

56 Starobinski (1968), 20.

57 "Arthur Rimbaud," Char (1983), 731 (my translation).

58 In "Letter on Humanism" [Brief über den Humanismus] (1946, 1947), Heidegger (2008), 217.

59 Char (1983), 183 (no. 34); Char (2010), 144–5.

figure in the reception of Heidegger in France.⁶⁰ The friendship between Char and Heidegger has been much commented upon, not least for the historical irony of the affinity between the Resistance poet and the Nazi-sympathizing philosopher.⁶¹ Yet George Steiner has rightly described the conversation between the two men as “at once predestined and almost vacant. Neither man spoke the other’s language.”⁶² To be sure, it is at Char’s invitation that Heidegger later visited the town of Le Thor, in Provence, where he led a series of seminars (in 1966, 1968, and 1969) that placed him in dialogue with Beaufret, François Vezin, François Fédier, Ginevra Bompiani, and Giorgio Agamben, among others. However, Char himself remains on the margins of the seminar discussions, despite hosting one of the meetings at his home in 1966.⁶³ When he uncharacteristically intervenes in that particular meeting, it is to say that Heraclitus, “belongs in the company of the poets” – to which Heidegger acquiesces.⁶⁴

Nevertheless, there is clearly a convergence between Heidegger’s analysis of the Heraclitean *logos* and Char’s understanding of the “exalting alliance of contraries.”⁶⁵ The encounter that Beaufret lauds as “the dialogue of poetry and thought”⁶⁶ has as its foundation, on the one hand, Heidegger’s interest in poetry, and, on the other, the two men’s shared interest in the Presocratics. For Heidegger, the Greeks represent both the “the grand beginning” of philosophy and the beginning of a fall into metaphysics, away, that is, from a conception of truth (*aletheia*) as unconcealment, and away from a concern with Being toward a preoccupation with beings.⁶⁷ His seminars at Le Thor cast Presocratic thought as a point of origin, prior to philosophy’s fall (which starts with Plato). The 1966 seminar encompasses discussions on Parmenides and Heraclitus (in the months that followed, Heidegger and Eugen Fink would give a seminar on Heraclitus at Freiburg).⁶⁸ Heidegger’s reading of Heraclitus focuses on the term *logos*, the word or cosmic principle that measures and organizes the relation day-night. Heidegger also emphasizes the difference between Heraclitus’ understanding of opposition and Hegelian dialectics: for Hegel, the day is the

60 See “Conversation Under the Chestnut Tree” [L’Entretien sous le marronnier], Beaufret (1963), repr. in Char (1983), 1137–43.

61 For a rethinking of questions of influence, intertextuality, and friendship around Char and Heidegger, see Worton (1996); see also Mullaney (1992).

62 Steiner (2012), 159.

63 Janicaud (2015), 145–6.

64 Quoted in Heidegger (2003), 8. The seminars were first published in French in 1976 (Heidegger (1976)).

65 See above, p. 182.

66 Beaufret (1963) in Char (1983), 1137.

67 See Hyland and Manoussakis (2006).

68 For the 1966/67 Heraclitus Seminar, see Heidegger and Fink (1993).

thesis and the night the *antithesis*, and the contradiction is resolved in a *synthesis*; for Heraclitus, the *diapheromenon* or “carrying apart” is also *sympheromenon*, convergence, and this unity composed of an intimate confrontation is the very principle of nature (*physis*).⁶⁹

Char’s affinity with Heidegger must be weighed against his own later rejection of any Heideggerian influence on his work, in a 1984 conversation reported by Veyne: “Parménides and Plato have no place here. Heidegger was a likeable man. [...] He especially interested me when he focused his telescope so accurately on the Greeks.”⁷⁰ In asserting his autonomy as a poet, Char simultaneously avows and disavows his connection to “the Greeks” (whom, we should note, Heidegger simply brings into clearer focus). Plato and Parménides, admittedly, do not seem to interest the poet much. Heraclitus is another matter. While less present in Char’s work, Anaximander and Anaxagoras also figure among Char’s favored “ascendants,” mentioned in a text from 1964.⁷¹ Along with Empedocles, these are thinkers who unite poetic and cosmological expression. But Char’s Greek references are mythological and poetic as much as they are philosophical; the title of “Évadné” in *The Nuptial Countenance*, for instance, associates the female figure of the poem with a nymph loved by Apollo, possibly drawing on Pindar’s treatment of this myth in *Olympian* 6.⁷²

In the prose text “Ancient Impressions” [Impressions anciennes] (1950; reworked in 1952 and 1964), which presents itself as a homage to Heidegger, Char articulates a vision that was already present in his 1948 text on Heraclitus: a pessimism about the present, which nevertheless encompasses hope for something unexpected that will overturn oppression.⁷³ While the philosopher Beaufret consistently reads Heraclitus (and Char) through Heidegger, Char on the contrary encounters Heidegger on the basis of his pre-existing interest in the Greeks. Char addresses Heraclitus in his own language, which is not Heideggerian. Close to Camus’s philhellenism, his reading of Heraclitus is a humanist interpretation, one that allies the Ephesian with painters of reality such as Georges de La Tour, who shed life on the contradictions of the human condition. Most importantly, the loss of dwelling and poetry’s reparative role are for Char specifically political questions, inseparable from the context of

69 Heidegger (2003), 5.

70 “Parménide et Platon n’ont rien à voir ici. Heidegger était un homme aimable [...] Il m’intéressait surtout quand il ajustait si bien sa longue-vue sur les Grecs.” Veyne (1990), 310 (my translation).

71 “Page d’ascendants pour l’an 1964,” Char (1983), 712.

72 Char (1983), 153; Char (2010), 100–1. On the myth of Evadne and its treatment by the Taiwanese poet Yang Mu, see Yeh, this volume.

73 Char (1983), 742–3.

the war and the tensions of the postwar years (when he would become an anti-nuclear activist), as well as from a more general pessimism about history as flux and reflux. Poetry brings the unknown into “this rebellious and solitary world of contradictions” [ce rebelle et solitaire monde de contradictions].⁷⁴

5 Postwar Presocratism: Caught “Between Words and Things”

The critical tendency to read the reception of the Presocratics through Heidegger finds both a counterpoint and a confirmation in the poet Henri Meschonnic’s (1932–2009) repeated attacks on the “Heidegger effect” in postwar French poetry. Accusing Heidegger of essentializing language and poetry, Meschonnic argues that Heidegger’s main contribution amounts merely to a repetition of Parmenides’ Fragment 3, which affirms the identity of thinking and being: “for the same thing is there for thinking and for being.”⁷⁵ However, in seeking to expose the traces of a pernicious Heideggerianism, Meschonnic overstates the German philosopher’s role in shaping the concerns and the language of other poets. As we have seen, the influence of the Presocratics in France is part of a longer history of philhellenism, mediated by Hegel and Nietzsche. Aragon’s 1927 article on Heraclitus shows that the Surrealists were familiar with contemporary scholarly debates.⁷⁶ Char, as we have seen, is familiar with Heraclitus from 1930 on, and with the work of Battistini from 1945. The three decades following the Second World War are a period of intense intellectual fascination with the ancient Greeks, as the supposed originators of Western thought. In addition to the aforementioned translations and studies of the Presocratics by Battistini, Beaufret, Jeannière, Ramnoux, Axelos, and Bollack,⁷⁷ Jean-Pierre Vernant’s *The Origins of Greek Thought* [Les Origines de la pensée grecque] appeared in 1962.⁷⁸ These thinkers offer interpretations that often diverge significantly, especially when it comes to the ambiguous Heraclitus.⁷⁹ Writers are embedded in this intellectual milieu. Breton cites

74 “Argument,” *The Pulverized Poem* [Le Poème pulverisé] (1945–1947), Char (1983), 247; Char (2010), 244–5.

75 τὸ γὰρ αὐτὸ νοεῖν ἐστίν τε καὶ εἶναι. Meschonnic (1990), 304 and (2001).

76 See above, p. 180. Aragon (1927) cites Bise (1925); and Oswald Spengler’s *The Decline of the West* [Der Untergang des Abendlandes] as presented in Fauconnet (1925).

77 See above, p. 176.

78 Vernant (1962).

79 Niels (1961) considers some of these interpretations, including among his French examples Beaufret’s Heideggerian insistence on truth as unconcealment, Jeannière’s reconstruction of Heraclitus’ thought in metaphysical and logical terms, and Ramnoux’s association of

Empedocles, via Battistini, in his 1965 reedition of *Surrealism and Painting* [Le Surréalisme et la peinture];⁸⁰ Blanchot takes up Ramnoux's reading of Heraclitus (and not Beaufret's Heideggerian interpretation) in *The Infinite Conversation* [L'Entretien infini] (1969).⁸¹ To these examples we must add that of the German-language poet Paul Celan (1920–1970), who moved to Paris in 1948 and whose friendship with Bollack and fascination with Empedocles are well-documented.⁸²

The point here is not to treat poets as philosophers, philologists, or classical scholars, but to observe that they work in close proximity to contemporary intellectual debates that shape their understanding of the relation of poetry to thought. The fundamental questions posed by the Presocratics are at stake in the transformations of poetic theory and practice. In somewhat schematic terms, it might be said that Parmenides' principle of the unity of thinking and being is the assumption underlying the Surrealist practice of automatic writing (understood as "spoken thought"),⁸³ while the encounter with Heraclitus bears witness to an increasing anxiety about the relationship between language, thought, and reality. As Steiner notes, "Rhapsodic and oracular intellects recognize in Heraclitus the fundamental, generative collision between the elusive opacity of the word and the equally elusive but compelling clarity and evidence of things."⁸⁴ Postwar poetry, reacting against the perceived falsifications of the Surrealist image and resisting the lure of the Romantic literary absolute, often attempts to "take the side of things" (following Ponge's expression, "le parti pris des choses").⁸⁵ Caught "between words and things" (to quote Ramnoux's description of Heraclitus), poets become increasingly suspicious of the illusions of both metaphysics and poetry, or of what Bonnefoy calls the "metaphysical imaginary," defined as "a set of narratives that have been made throughout human history, of myths in which we attempt to have faith, on a backdrop of figures judged to be divine or endowed without our noticing it with characteristics that belong to the divine" [un ensemble à travers l'histoire humaine de récits que l'on se fait, de mythes auxquels on tente de donner foi, sur un arrière-plan de figures jugées divines ou dotées sans qu'on en prenne

the archaic and the primitive. Niels prefers to some of these speculative approaches the philological approach of G. S. Kirk in *Heraclitus: The Cosmic Fragments* (Kirk (1954)).

80 Breton (1928–1965), 344.

81 "Heraclitus," in Blanchot (1993), 85–92.

82 Bollack (2001).

83 Breton (1969), 24.

84 Steiner (2012), 34.

85 Ponge (1942), often translated into English as "The Voice of Things" (see Ponge (1974)).

conscience de caractéristiques qui sont le fait du divin].⁸⁶ It is primarily in this anti-metaphysical turn that poetry draws close to Heidegger's philosophical project. However, it is important to recognize the specific poetic context in which Bonnefoy is working, and above all his complex relation to the poetic legacy of the Surrealists. One of Bonnefoy's examples of the metaphysical thinker who seeks a superior realm beyond the real is precisely André Breton, who, unable to accept the ordinary humanity of those he encounters, transforms the women he passes in the street into idealized figures of Woman.⁸⁷

6 Bonnefoy and the Quest for a "Poetics of Presence"

Bonnefoy, like Char, but at a later moment (1945–1947), was briefly associated with Breton and the Surrealists. He would go on to be a prolific poet and essayist, as well as a translator – especially of English and Italian texts (Shakespeare, Yeats, Donne, Leopardi, Petrarch), but with an incursion into modern Greek, in order to translate poems by his friend George Seferis. He encountered, however, ancient Greek texts in translation, beginning with Leconte de Lisle's translation of Homer in his family library.⁸⁸ As for the Presocratics, their reflection on nature remains in the background of Bonnefoy's quest for a poetics of presence, formulated in opposition to the Surrealist poetics of the image.

The Surrealist sensibility is still clearly present in Bonnefoy's early poem sequence *Anti-Plato* [Anti-Platon] of 1947. However, it takes on a specific philosophical orientation:

Il s'agit bien de *cet* objet: tête de cheval plus grande que nature où s'incrute toute une ville, ses rues et ses remparts courants entre les yeux, épousant le méandre et l'allongement du museau.

[The question is, *this* object: a horse's head larger than life encrusted with a whole town, streets and walls running between the eyes, assuming the curve and elongation of the muzzle.]⁸⁹

The poet affirms the singular features of a strange object: a horse's head containing a city. In its composite and uncanny nature, the horse's head recalls

86 Bonnefoy (2006), 9 (my translation).

87 Bonnefoy (2006), 8.

88 Bonnefoy (1994). On translation, see Bonnefoy (2000).

89 Bonnefoy (1986), 33; Bonnefoy (1991), 3. Emphasis in original.

Surrealist objects. Yet Bonnefoy's concern is not the revelation of the unconscious associations and resonances of the object, but the haecceity or "this-ness" of the object itself, its absolute particularity. From the description of the fantastic object the poem then moves to a more elemental space, a place designated only by the deictic "here" and described as a minimal landscape:

Toutes choses d'ici, pays de l'osier, de la robe, de la pierre, c'est-à-dire: pays de l'eau sur les osiers et les pierres, pays des robes tachées. Ce rire couvert de sang, je vous le dis, trafiquants d'éternel, visages symétriques, absence du regard, pèse plus lourd dans la tête de l'homme que les parfaites Idées, qui ne savent que déteindre sur la bouche.

[All things from here, the land of the osier, of the dress, of the stone, that is: the land of water flowing among osiers and stones, the land of splashed dresses. This laughter covered with blood, I tell you, traffickers in the eternal, blank-eyed, symmetrical faces, weighs more heavily in the head of a man than the perfect Ideas, which do nothing but lose their color in his mouth.]⁹⁰

The place is conjured by a list that emphasizes both the generalizing and specifying function of language, presenting first a series of objects – osier, dress, stone – and afterwards placing them in a particular relation to other things: water among the osiers and stones, splashed dresses. The "anti-Platonic" impulse is harnessed to the Heraclitean motif of the river's flow, and by extension the general principle of *panta rhei* or "all flows."⁹¹ The poem gives primacy to embodied and inarticulate laughter (also associated with mortality by the reference to blood), over the colorless perfect ideas of the "traffickers in the eternal" with their statuesque (bloodless?) faces. The poem links the dangers of the Platonic Ideas to the problem of language itself, with its capacity for abstraction.

In his essays, Bonnefoy uses the term *image* to name this temptation of the elsewhere, the problem being that images do not always present themselves as colorless, weightless ideas but in fact bear a deceptive radiance: "This impression of a reality at last fully incarnate, which comes to us, paradoxically, through words which have turned away from incarnation, I shall call *image*"

90 Bonnefoy (1986), 33; Bonnefoy (1991), 3.

91 The Heraclitean phrase *panta rhei* is not found in the extant fragments but is attributed to Heraclitus by Plato. "The Platonic phrase is just a stand-in for the first half of B12 [= Fragment 12 D-K]," Graham (2008), 174.

[J'appellerai image cette impression de réalité enfin pleinement incarnée qui nous vient, paradoxalement, de mots détournés de l'incarnation].⁹² The image that was the *raison d'être* of poetry for the Surrealists now becomes its adversary: "Without hesitation I defined truthfulness of speech as the war against the Image – the substitution of an image for the world – in favor of presence" [La vérité de parole, je l'ai dite sans hésiter la guerre contre l'image – le monde-image –, pour la présence].⁹³ While this might seem to be a very Platonic worry, recalling the Allegory of the Cave, Bonnefoy's aim is not to look beyond sense impressions to perceive the Forms beyond the phenomenal world, but rather the opposite: to break free from the hold of the conceptual apparatus that separates us from the world perceptible to the senses, or to escape the snares of the metaphysical imaginary that lead us to posit the existence a fictitious, superior reality. *Eidos* and *eidolon* are conflated in this conception of the image, as twin consequences of the disincarnating operations of language. Nevertheless, Bonnefoy also asserts, poetry cannot ignore the image entirely but must recognize it as a form of desire, putting in place a "dialectic of dream and existence" that reintegrates images into the "unity of life."⁹⁴

Bonnefoy's anti-Platonism is thus an inverse Platonism that requires a particular way of "taking hold" of words:

Que je dise le "feu" [...] et, poétiquement, ce que ce mot évoque pour moi, ce n'est pas seulement le feu dans sa nature de feu – ce que, du feu, peut proposer son concept: c'est la présence du feu, dans l'horizon de ma vie, et non certes comme un objet, analysable et utilisable (et, par conséquent, fini, remplaçable), mais comme un dieu, actif, doué de pouvoirs.

[If I say "fire" [...], poetically what this word evokes for me is not only fire in its nature as fire – what there is about fire that suggests its concept – but the presence of fire in the horizon of my life, and certainly not as an object, analyzable and usable (and therefore, finite, replaceable), but as a god, active and endowed with powers.]⁹⁵

Bonnefoy's language in this essay from 1965 bears the mark of Heideggerian influence in its turn away from the technicity of the object to its mode of

92 "Image and Presence" [La Présence et l'image], Bonnefoy (1989), 164; Bonnefoy (1989), 164 (trans. John T. Naughton).

93 Bonnefoy (1990), 200; Bonnefoy (1989), 171.

94 Bonnefoy (1990), 201; Bonnefoy (1989), 172.

95 "French Poetry and the Principle of Identity" [La Poésie française et le principe d'identité], Bonnefoy (1967), 105; Bonnefoy (1989), 119 (trans. Richard Stamelman).

“presence,” a key word for Bonnefoy that is close to what Heidegger would call “presencing” [Anwesen]. Here we might recall Heidegger’s claim that Greek thinkers, and first of all the Presocratics, experienced being as the “presencing of presencing.”⁹⁶ Yet Bonnefoy’s vocabulary merges different philosophical traditions. His language recalls Heraclitus, for whom fire was the central element of the cosmos and the active principle of change. It also takes on a neo-Platonic resonance, for instance when he asserts that French words are “half-transparent,” the consonants bearing “the faded imprint of an absolute root, while the vowels, which become apparent through this structure, are either like the shadows of tangible existence or, as in the case of the mute ‘e,’ like the light that comes from the One” [l’empreinte atténuée d’un radical absolu, tandis que les voyelles apparaissent à travers elle, certaines comme les ombres de l’existence sensible, et d’autres – le e muet par exemple – comme la lumière qui vient de l’Un].⁹⁷

Language resists and reveals. Between the colorless Ideas and the bright colors of objects, Bonnefoy’s poems celebrate the in-between, the passage or oscillation between extremes, the color grey – like Kathleen Ferrier’s “voice mixed with gray” [voix mêlée de couleur grise] in Bonnefoy’s homage to the singer:

Comme si au delà de toute forme pure
Tremblât un autre chant et le seul absolu

[as if beyond all pure form
there were to tremble another song, the absolute]

lines 7–8⁹⁸

Beyond the immobility of the form or image, the absolute is located in music, in the movement of the voice.

7 *L’Éphémère, the One and the Many*

This absolute for Bonnefoy is equivalent to the One [l’Un], in the neo-Platonic vocabulary that, paradoxically, he sets against Plato. The One is a recurring motif in Bonnefoy’s essays, along with the related idea of light – the single light that emanates from within and is a mode of access to the One, as in the

96 Heidegger (2003), 38.

97 Bonnefoy (1967) 114; Bonnefoy (1989) 130.

98 Bonnefoy (1986) 159; Caws (2004), 373 (trans. by M. A. Caws).

passage from Plotinus that is included in an inserted notice with the first issue of the poetry and art journal *L'Éphémère*, in 1967.⁹⁹ At Bonnefoy's initiative, the first issue of *L'Éphémère* also places on its back cover a Plotinian question: "But what discourse is possible with respect to what is absolutely simple?" [Mais quel discours est possible lorsqu'il s'agit de ce qui est absolument simple?].¹⁰⁰

What is "absolutely simple" in Plotinus is the One (τὸ ἓν/*to hen*), the first principle, self-caused, on which everything else depends ontologically (his other principles are Intellect and Soul).¹⁰¹ Discourse, however, or discursive understanding (*dianoia*), works by division.¹⁰² The relation of the One and the many is of course a much older question, that Plotinus seeks to elucidate by returning to the contributions of Parmenides, Anaxagoras, Empedocles, and Heraclitus. Parmenides, says Plotinus, affirms the motionless unity of knowing and being; Anaxagoras "affirms a simplex First and a sundered One;" Heraclitus sees bodily forms as in flux but "knows the One as eternal and intellectual;" Empedocles similarly sets a dividing force, "'Strife,' set against 'Friendship' – which is the One."¹⁰³

Bonnefoy, for his part, understands the Plotinian One not as an elsewhere, or even as the unifying principle of contraries as in Heraclitus' "all things are one" (united by the rational order of the *logos*).¹⁰⁴ Rather, it is what is closest to us in the intelligible world, an immediate apprehension of the world that escapes the grasp of a divided and dividing thought.¹⁰⁵ This implies a unity of the self in its experience of the world, and also in relation to its own dreams of an elsewhere. If Bonnefoy's notion of "Presence" sometimes seems to suggest a quasi-mystical form of poetic transcendence, his poetic absolute is

99 "For example, in the darkness of the night, it [light] leaps out from the eye, and extends outwards. And if the eye lowers its lids, not wishing to see, it still emits it. And if we press the eye with a finger, it sees the light within itself. In that case, it sees without seeing; and it is then that it really sees: since it finally sees light. The other realities were luminous; they were not light" [Par exemple, dans l'obscurité de la nuit, elle s'élance de l'œil, elle s'étend alentour. Et s'il abaisse ses paupières, ne voulant voir, il l'émet encore. Et si on le presse du doigt, il voit la lumière qui est en lui. En ce cas, il voit sans rien voir; et c'est alors et surtout qu'il voit: puisqu'enfin il voit la lumière. Les autres réalités étaient lumineuses, elles n'étaient pas la lumière]. Plotinus, *Enneads* v.5.7 (my translation from Bonnefoy's unattributed version); see also MacKenna (1962), 409; see Mascarou (1998), 32.

100 *L'Éphémère* 1 (1967), back cover.

101 Gerson (2018).

102 Plotinus, *Enneads*, v.3.17: "for the understanding, in order to its affirmation must possess itself of item after item; only so does it traverse all the field: but how can there be any such peregrination of that in which there is no variety?" (MacKenna (1962), 399).

103 Plotinus, *Enneads*, v.1.8–9 (MacKenna (1962), 377).

104 ἓν πάντα εἶναι: Heraclitus, Fragment 50 D-K.

105 See Née (1999), 167–73.

nevertheless inseparable from a constant self-critique of poetry (and of philosophy), an acknowledgment of the limits of thought and language.¹⁰⁶ The problem is then that reality itself, conceived as inaccessible to language, then tends to become another version of the elsewhere, the beyond, the hinterland [arrière-pays] always beyond our reach. A quotation from Antonin Artaud (1896–1948) on the cover of the fourth issue of *L'Éphémère* reiterates this understanding of the real: “Moreover when we say the word *life*, we understand this is not life recognized by externals, by facts, but the kind of frail moving source forms never attain” [Aussi bien, quand nous prononçons le mot de vie, faut-il entendre qu’il ne s’agit pas de la vie reconnue par le dehors des faits, mais de cette sorte de fragile et remuant foyer auquel ne touchent pas les formes].¹⁰⁷

With *L'Éphémère*, Bonnefoy’s anti-Platonic project takes on a collective dimension. The publication was edited by Bonnefoy along with André du Bouchet, Louis-René des Forêts, and Gaëtan Picon from 1967 to 1968, with Michel Leiris and Paul Celan replacing Picon on the board from 1968–1972. The poet Jacques Dupin, the literary editor for the Maeght publishing house, was also closely involved. The journal reveals the multiple potentialities of a shared philosophical poetics. The journal’s name is congruent with the notion, articulated in a statement of intention in 1967, of the poetic work as “act, overcoming, becoming.”¹⁰⁸ The poem itself is ephemeral, but the poetic act endures precisely by giving expression to the ephemeral: “The ephemeral is what remains, when its visible figure is ceaselessly re-erased” [L’éphémère est ce qui demeure, dès lors que sa figure visible est sans cesse ré-effacée].¹⁰⁹ This is a supremely Heraclitean assertion: nothing endures but change. By redefining the poetic absolute as what lies beyond forms, the journal combines an emphasis on flux with a neo-Platonic vocabulary of poetic transcendence. At the same time, the quest for the “absolutely simple” entails a mode of poetic literalism and an elemental poetry – a turn to the most basic elements of human perception and experience. The combination of a quest for luminous transcendence with an aesthetics of absolute simplicity is shared by other poets of *L'Éphémère*, for instance, in du Bouchet’s conception of poetry as at once “dazzling and banal”

106 On the anti-Romantic dimension of Bonnefoy’s poetry and that of the other poets associated with *L'Éphémère*, see Petterson (2000), 17.

107 *L'Éphémère* 4 (September 1967): back cover. The quotation is from Artaud’s preface to *The Theatre and its Double* [Le Théâtre et son double] (1938), trans. by Victor Corti (Artaud (1974), iv.6).

108 “L’ÉPHÉMÈRE a pour origine le sentiment qu’il existe une approche du réel dont l’œuvre poétique est seulement le moyen. En d’autres mots: il ne faut pas consentir à réduire l’œuvre – acte, dépassement, devenir – à la nature d’un objet, où cet au-delà se dérobe.” Insertion included with *L'Éphémère* 1 (1967), quoted in Mascarou (1998), 32.

109 Mascarou (1998), 32 (my translation).

[aveuglante ou banale].¹¹⁰ It pushes poetry toward forms of fragmentary notation (already in evidence in Char's aphorisms) or toward an elemental minimalism as in du Bouchet – formally very different, but nevertheless sharing a similar philosophical attunement, and pursuing the same lyrical quest to grasp the ephemeral.

8 Ever Different Waters: Philippe Jaccottet

In the notebooks published as *Seedtime* [La Semaïson] (1984), the Franco-Swiss poet Philippe Jaccottet (1925–2021) punctuates his jotted observations with quotations from both Plotinus and the Presocratics. (Jaccottet quotes from French translations in this case, even though, we should note, he does read Greek, having studied classics at Lausanne and later translated Homer's *Odyssey* and Plato's *Symposium*, as well as poems in German, Italian, and Spanish). A note dated January 1964 includes fragments from Parmenides (in Battistini's translation) evoking the “borrowed light” of the moon [une lumière empruntée rôde par la nuit autour de la terre] and “the earth rooted in water” [la terre enracinée dans l'eau], while Empedocles offers the images of “rain, mother of the dark and the cold” [la pluie mère des ténèbres et du froid] and “the ear, fleshy sprout in which a bell rings” [l'oreille, nœud de chair où vibre une cloche].¹¹¹ Jaccottet finds in these thinkers a repertory of images that defamiliarize the physical world without transforming it (the earth “rooted in water” is not Éluard's earth “blue like an orange”). While simple, these images convey a sense of wonder at the perception of nature, the relation of substances, and the continuity between matter and sensation. Later, in a note from May 1979, Jaccottet takes up Plotinus' question, articulated in even simpler terms than Bonnefoy's version: “Simple but, as Plotinus says: ‘How can one speak about the absolutely simple?’” [Simple, mais comme dit Plotin: Comment parler de ce qui est absolument simple?].¹¹² The difficulty lies in evoking the immediate experience of the world, simply naming the beauty of this tree, this flower, this space by a stream with its shades of green and the song of nightingales. Yet this simplicity is inseparable from multiplicity (of leaves, flowers, songs, shades of green), like the natural dispersal of seeds designated by the book's title.

110 Du Bouchet (2011).

111 Jaccottet (2014), 378; Jaccottet (2013), 83. Parmenides, Fragment 14: νυκτιφαές περὶ γαῖαν ἀλώμενον ἀλλότρισιν φῶς (see Graham (2013), 85–108, chapter on “Borrowed Light: The Insight of Parmenides”) and Fragment 15a: ὑδατόριζον εἶπεν τὴν γῆν; Empedocles, Fragment 99: κώδων. σάρκινος ὄζος. Fragment 21: ὄμβρον δ' ἐν πάσι δνοφόνετ' αὖτε ῥιγαλέον τε.

112 Jaccottet (2014), 673; Jaccottet (2013), 335. See also above, p. 195.

In one of his poetic chronicles Jaccottet remarks that poetry gives “us the real, if only for an instant; and with the real, a *chance at life*” [nous rend, ne serait-ce qu’un instant, le réel; et, avec le réel, une *chance de vie*].¹¹³ To achieve this, he notes, modern poetry often seeks to return to origins, hence the affinity of many poets with “those philosopher poets of Presocratic Greece for whom, before the great development of logical thought, visible things are at once so present and so laden with the infinite” [ces poètes philosophes de la Grèce présocratique chez qui, avant le grand développement de la pensée logique, les choses visibles sont à la fois si présentes et si chargées d’illimité].¹¹⁴ It is the need to unite the one and the multiple that leads Jaccottet to reassert the necessity of the poetic image:

La poésie est elle-même non pas dans le maintien à tout prix de telle ou telle prosodie, mais dans l’usage de la comparaison, de la métaphore ou de toute autre *mise en rapport*; elle est au plus près d’elle-même dans la mise en rapport des contraires fondamentaux: dehors et dedans, haut et bas, lumière et obscurité, illimité et limite.

[Poetry is itself not in the upholding of such and such a prosody at all costs, but in the use of comparison, metaphor or any other way *of bringing together*. It is closest to itself when it brings together fundamental contraries: outside and inside, high and low, light and darkness, the limitless and the limit.]¹¹⁵

Jaccottet goes on to identify the singular manner of grasping contraries at work in a number of poets, such as Char’s grasp of the eternal in the instant. Mentioning Breton, Jaccottet explicitly links contemporary poetry back to the Surrealist tradition that had sought the mysterious point of encounter between opposing principles.¹¹⁶ But this does not mean the fusion of dream and reality, or of consciousness and the unconscious, that the Surrealists had in mind. Jaccottet invites a certain rehabilitation of the image despite the critique to which Bonnefoy and others had subjected it. Poetry is an alliance of contraries, in the service not of a transcendent poetic truth, but rather of fidelity to the concrete, the present, the perceptible.

113 Jaccottet (1968), 301; Stamelman (1990), 196 (orig. emphasis).

114 Jaccottet (1968), 305 (my translation).

115 Jaccottet (1968), 303–4 (my translation).

116 Jaccottet (1968), 303. On Jaccottet’s conception of poetry and his relationship to philosophy, see Elie (2004).

Jaccottet's own images can indeed be absolutely simple in their literalness. For instance, a poem fragment included in his first collection *The Barn Owl* [L'Effraie] (1953) describes the troubled waters of the Seine on a March day in 1947, before evoking in parentheses a childhood game of throwing a flower into a canal at the source and finding it downstream. A Heraclitean meditation follows the parentheses:

Souvenir de l'enfance. Les eaux jamais les mêmes,
ni les jours: celui qui prendrait l'eau dans ses mains ...

Quelqu'un allume un feu de branches sur la rive.

[Memory of childhood. Waters never the same,
nor days: he who would gather water in his hands ...

Someone lights a fire of branches on the bank.]¹¹⁷

The poem brings together past and present, permanence and change, situating them in a particular moment and movement. The childhood memory might be the remembered saying from Heraclitus about the ever-changing waters of the river, but it is also a memory of the child's embodied game of attempting to follow the flow of the water. The incomplete phrase, "He who would gather water in his hands," may also refer to a remembered gesture, but teeters on the edge of philosophic statement. It is also a metapoetic expression of the poet's aim to grasp the moment or the ephemeral. Yet the layering of poetic and philosophical reflection, and of past and present, is allied with an utter simplicity of statement: the water rises, childhood passes, someone lights a fire.

9 Conclusion

This essay has not aimed to cover the whole story of modern French poetry's dialogue with antiquity. Other axes of inquiry would include, for example, the uses of Greek myth (in which Bonnefoy also had an interest),¹¹⁸ translations

¹¹⁷ In Jaccottet (2014), 18; Jaccottet (1974), 17.

¹¹⁸ Bonnefoy (1981); cf. also, e.g., Bonnefoy's poem "And I think of Kore" [Et je pense à Coré] (1965). Cf. also, for example, the myths of Narcissus (e.g., Paul Valéry, "Narcissus Speaks" [Narcisse parle] (1891; rev. 1920); or "Fragments of Narcissus" [Fragments du Narcisse] (1922)); Orpheus (e.g., Guillaume Apollinaire, *The Bestiary or The Parade of Orpheus* [Le Bestiaire, ou, Cortège d'Orphée] (1911)), or Leda (e.g., Paul Éluard, "Leda" (1949)).

of classical poetry by Marguerite Yourcenar and others,¹¹⁹ or formal experiments such as those of the Oulipo group, which revive an ancient tradition of poetic constraint dating back to the Hellenistic period (lipograms, acrostics, mesostich, tautograms).¹²⁰ Rather, my focus has been on the dense philosophical-poetic nexus that emerges around the reception of the Presocratics in twentieth-century France. It is in the post-World War II period that this dialogue between poetry and philosophy becomes the most intense and finds common ground in the encounter with the Greeks. The Presocratics, in this context, represent at once a return to origins and the possibility of a new relationship to the world – an intimate proximity with things. Following in the footsteps of the Surrealists, who aimed to reintegrate poetic and philosophical traditions outside the constraints of logic, poets turn to Presocratic thought – especially but not exclusively the fragments of Heraclitus – in order to question the relationship between language, experience, and thought. Poetic images, in their role as mediators between sensory experience and abstract ideas, and as unifying principles linking different aspects of the world, become the object of both fascination and suspicion, at once an expression of and an obstacle to the experience of being in the world. More recently, these debates continue to play out in the radical realism and anti-imagist stance of the advocates of “literal-ity” in poetry.¹²¹ There is certainly no single Presocratic poetics, any more than there is any single Presocratic philosophy. However, the poets examined here negotiate in different ways the age-old problem of the one and the many, the confrontation with human finitude, and the effort to discern an invisible unity in a world of multiplicity and conflict.

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119 E.g., Yourcenar (1979); for Yourcenar’s interest in the ancient world, see also her novel *Memoirs of Hadrian* [Mémoires d’Hadrien (1951)] or poems such as “Clytemnestra, or Crime” [Clytemnestre, ou, Le crime] (1935) or “Phaedra, or Despair” [Phèdre, ou, Le désespoir] (1936). See also Valéry’s translation of Virgil’s *Eclogues* [Les Bucoliques de Virgile] (1953).

120 See Tronchet (2015–2016).

121 See, for example, Gleize (1995).

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“der Aquädukte Herkunft”

Rilke and the Uses of Antiquity

Charlie Louth

Often Rainer Maria Rilke (Prague 1875–Valmont 1926) connects poetry with a reaching back into the distant past.¹ In an essay written in 1913, “On the Young Poet” [Über den jungen Dichter], he sees the poet as a place where “Vorzeit” (“pre-history,” or earlier, ancient times) erupts, breaks the surface, and so re-connects our present to the past.² Poetry renews itself by touching again an archaic source, creating, in T. S. Eliot’s term, a momentary “simultaneous existence.”³ There are channels leading back into the past, and poetry depends on locating them and keeping them open.

1 *Sonnets to Orpheus, Archaeological Traces, and Auguste Rodin*

There are many places in Rilke’s work that imply this issuing of pastness into the present. One is the fifteenth poem from the Second Part of his *Sonnets to Orpheus* [Die Sonette an Orpheus] (1923):

O Brunnen-Mund, du gebender, du Mund,
der unerschöpflich Eines, Reines, spricht, –
du, vor des Wassers fließendem Gesicht,
marmorne Maske. Und im Hintergrund

der Aquädukte Herkunft. Weither an
Gräbern vorbei, vom Hang des Apennins

1 Abbreviations used: SW = Rainer Maria Rilke, *Sämtliche Werke*, ed. by Ernst Zinn et al., 7 vols. (Wiesbaden and Frankfurt am Main: Insel, 1955–1997).

2 SW vi.1046. This is at once an old idea and one that had a particular currency in the early decades of the twentieth century. Eliot ((1933), 148), summarizing “the theories of Lévy-Bruhl” as applied by E. Cailliet and J. A. Bédé, writes that “the pre-logical mentality persists in civilised man, but becomes available only to or through the poet.”

3 In Eliot’s definition of the “historical sense” in the essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent” (Eliot (1951), 14).

tragen sie dir dein Sagen zu, das dann
am schwarzen Altern deines Kinns

vorüberfällt in das Gefäß davor.
Dies ist das schlafend hingelegte Ohr,
das Marmorohr, in das du immer sprichst.

Ein Ohr der Erde. Nur mit sich allein
redet sie also. Schiebt ein Krug sich ein,
so scheint es ihr, daß du sie unterbrichst.

[O fountain-mouth, donation, o mouth
which inexhaustibly continues saying
the one pure thing, – you marble mask before
the water's flowing face. In the background

the aqueducts' descent. From far away,
past tombs, from the Apennines' slope,
they bring to you your saying,
which, past the blackened ageing of your chin,

then falls into the basin there before it.
This is the sleeping, the recumbent ear,
the ear of marble into which you always speak.

An ear of Earth's. Thus she is talking
with herself alone. And if a pitcher
slips in she feels you interrupt her.]⁴

The fountain's mouth, from which a constant stream of water spouts, is the point where the "background" becomes visible, where depth becomes surface, where the long "coming on," the tradition feeding present speech, becomes audible and thus an aspect of the present moment. The poem is quite specific about the course the water has taken before it spills out in the fountain. It has been channeled along aqueducts, past graves, from the Apennines. We are in Rome and in the present, but the stream of water comes from far away, from the mountains, from the dead, and only forms the clear unified spout

4 SW i:760–1; Rilke (2015), 106 (slightly adapted).

it does thanks to an ancient feat of engineering which when Rilke was writing still performed its original function. The phrase “the aqueducts’ descent” [der Aquädukte Herkunft] catches both the striding in of the aqueducts from the surrounding countryside, across space, the work of culture which (still) connects the metropolis to nature, and their ancient origin, the awareness that the present “speech” depends on a tradition of speaking, across time. The three elements – aqueducts, graves, mountains – associate poetry with antiquity, death and nature and put these three things on a par as that which poetic speech cannot do without. Together, they make up poetic tradition, the huge preceding work which sustains individual utterance in the present. But they also represent tradition in a larger sense, as that which comes to us from the past. The water, as it flows back into the earth via the upturned “ear” of the fountain’s basin, replenishes what fed it, and the poem we are reading, which is one modern poem that has drawn on tradition, likewise works to keep the tradition alive. It operates at and as the threshold, where the past is no more and the future is not yet – the point where the water emerges from the pipe in the marble mask’s mouth. The “aging” of the chin is countered by the continuous arrival of the past, the replenishment of the present.

In the context of the cycle as a whole, the mouth being addressed at the beginning belongs to Orpheus, or stands for him, and he himself stands for the possibility of poetic speech, of a speech which re-establishes poetry as a celebratory and fundamental “saying” of existence in all its contradictoriness. By addressing poems to Orpheus Rilke is suggesting, but more importantly willing into truth, that the modern age and an ancient conception of poetry can still be brought together, that life is still “sayable” or “singable” in its entirety, and that it needs to be if we are to live it properly. Rilke’s reanimation of Orpheus is in some ways a surprising one, and we shall return to it, but for the moment we can note three things about his relation to antiquity as it appears in the fountain sonnet which hold true for most of his work: first, that it *is* a sonnet – there is an odd and not at all obvious conjunction in Rilke’s work between classical themes and the non-classical form of the sonnet; second, that the reference to a classical past occurs as an instance of the past in general as it breaks into the present; and third, that he responds much more to artefacts – here, the aqueducts – than to texts. “O fountain-mouth” reminds us that the aqueducts “come down” to us as actual traces of antiquity that survive into the present, and that they bear with them the connection to the past which allows present speech.

The flow of water through ancient stone – the channeling of present utterance by structures inherited from the past – is also the subject of an earlier poem from the *Sonnets to Orpheus*, the tenth poem from its First Part:

Euch, die ihr nie mein Gefühl verließt,
grüß ich, antikische Sarkophage,
die das fröhliche Wasser römischer Tage
als ein wandelndes Lied durchfließt.

[You, who have never left my feelings,
I greet you, antique sarcophagi,
through which the cheerful water of Roman days
flows like a meandering song.]

lines 1–4⁵

The contrast here – but it is also an interdependence – between the ancient sarcophagi which provide the stable form and the living water which is also song and associated with change (one implication of “wandelndes,” the German word given here as “meandering”) is the same as in “O fountain-mouth,” and in the context of the *Sonnets to Orpheus* as a whole points not just to the idea of the present being enclosed by the ancient past but to that of life being enclosed by death. What Rilke is remembering is the use of ancient sarcophagi as conduits and troughs in Rome, which he had already written about in the first volume of his *New Poems* [Neue Gedichte] (1907).⁶ The poem “Roman Sarcophagi” [Römische Sarkophage], also a sonnet, ends:

Da wurde von den alten Aquädukten
ewiges Wasser in sie eingelenkt –:
das spiegelt jetzt und geht und glänzt in ihnen.

[Then from the ancient aqueducts
eternal water was steered into them –:
which mirrors in them now and moves and glints.]⁷

The present here, in the verbs of the last line, in its lively movement and iridescence, gains in poignancy from its proximity to mortuary stone, and it is strongly implied that the poem we are reading also derives its force from the reanimation of an old form, its language’s skillful negotiation and articulation of the sonnet’s constraints. To return to the tenth poem from the First Part of the *Sonnets to Orpheus*, with its opening assertion that the sarcophagi have never been absent from the poet’s feelings, it can in turn be understood as

⁵ SW 1.737; Rilke (2005), 25.

⁶ See below, p. 213 onwards, for more on this collection.

⁷ SW 1.510; Rilke (1984), 85.

taking up the old form, or even the old poem (“Roman sarcophagi”), again, sending a new stream of language through it. Like the coffins used as conduits, old forms can be put to new use, and writing is understood as a form of recycling.⁸

All three poems mentioned so far, in their juxtaposition of stone and water, reflect on tradition, on poetic form, and on the present’s emergence from the past. The “meandering song” of the present depends on an ancient inheritance. All three poems are also sonnets, and the consistency with which Rilke uses the sonnet form when dealing with classical subjects is something which has long been noticed.⁹ Given the Apollo sonnets which open each volume of the *New Poems* – “Early Apollo” [Früher Apollo] and “Archaic Torso of Apollo” [Archaischer Torso Apollos]¹⁰ (on which see below) – and the *Sonnets to Orpheus* themselves, this seems almost programmatic. As has also long been recognized, there are – despite the title of an early collection, *Offerings to the Lares* [Larenopfer] (1895) – no significant traces of classical antiquity in Rilke’s poetic work until the *New Poems*, but the classical then becomes a very significant component of this collection.¹¹ Likewise, there is only a single sonnet in Rilke’s (voluminous) work before the *New Poems*, whereas about a quarter of the latter are sonnets, with many more poems offering variations on the sonnet form. This coincidence clearly has a lot to do with the influence of the sculptor Auguste Rodin (1840–1917), who is usually held responsible for the arrival of the classical in Rilke’s work.¹²

From Rodin, whom he went to Paris to write a study on in 1902,¹³ and in whose orbit he remained during the following years while he worked on the *New Poems*, Rilke learnt the importance of the artist’s knowing his material, and as his writing took a sculptural turn the sonnet seemed to offer an inherited form which had some of the qualities – distinct edges, free-standingness, a certain “stature” – that Rilke admired and sought to emulate in Rodin’s works. That

8 This idea is taken to an extreme by Stephan Turowski (2016), who reads the sarcophagi in *Sonnets to Orpheus* 1.10 as representing the whole of Rilke’s work written up to that point.

9 See Spörl (1999), 57. Spörl refers to Werner Kohlschmidt’s essay “Rilke und die Antike” (in Kohlschmidt (1948), 37–78), which is still probably the best on the subject. Kohlschmidt ((1948), 41) suggests that the use of the sonnet and the turn to antiquity are part of a new self-discipline.

10 SW i.481 and 557. The two volumes, *New Poems* [Neue Gedichte] (published in December 1907) and *New Poems: The Other Part* [Der Neuen Gedichte anderer Teil] (published in July 1908) were brought together, under the same cover, in 1928, two years after Rilke’s death.

11 See Spörl (1999), 39. Also, Böschstein (2006), 199 (in the chapter “Antike Gottheiten in den französischen Gedichten Rilkes”).

12 See Spörl (1999), 41–2.

13 Rilke’s monograph *Auguste Rodin* was published in 1903.

Rodin's sculptures were classically inspired, and that many of Rodin's enthusiasms – notably Ovid – became Rilke's, makes it easier to understand how an association between the classical and the sonnet established itself which was strong enough, even though Rilke wrote few sonnets in the interim, to offer itself again in 1922 as the natural form for the rapidly composed *Sonnets to Orpheus*.¹⁴ And although Rilke composed few sonnets of his own between the two collections, *New Poems* (1907–1908) and the *Sonnets to Orpheus* (1923), he translated them in great numbers, notably those by Michelangelo (1475–1564), who as a sculptor forms an important link between antiquity and Rodin. It is possible to see that Rilke's implicit association of the sonnet and antiquity continues with his work on Michelangelo.¹⁵ But though the sonnet is a common factor to the two collections, it is handled quite differently. If in the *New Poems* Rilke seems to be using it for its sculptural qualities, sculpture is no longer a relevant model for the *Sonnets to Orpheus*, which are much more interested in the living, dancing body. In the *Sonnets to Orpheus* the sonnet is treated very freely indeed, no two of the fifty-five being metrically alike, and they are shot through with classical measures.¹⁶ Though there is nothing fragmentary about the way they feel, they are in fact artefacts made up of various metrical fragments, almost bricolage, rather like the water courses Rilke saw in Rome made of pieces of old stonework.

2 Rilke's Classical Knowledge

Before we look at the *New Poems* more closely, it is worth pausing over the question of what Rilke received by way of a classical education and where his notions of antiquity came from before the encounter with Rodin. Rilke did learn some Greek and Latin as a child, but only late on, when he attempted to cram the usual six years of Latin and Greek into three, receiving private tuition to enable him to take the Gymnasium exams. His marks were usually "satisfactory," and there is no sign that Rilke regarded it all as much more than a necessary chore.¹⁷ From this period there survives a translation of 36

14 On Rilke and Ovid, see the invaluable study by Vilain (2010a), though the emphasis is not particularly on the *Sonnets to Orpheus*. See also Vilain (2010b), 134–5.

15 Rilke's Michelangelo translations, well over half of which are sonnets, were done from 1912 to 1923. They can be found at SW vii.797–917.

16 See Louth (2015).

17 See Schnack (2009), 32. For more detail, see Spörl (1999), Vilain (2010) and the foundational work by Ernst Zinn "Rainer Maria Rilke und die Antike" ((1994), 315–77). Finally, Spörl's briefer account in Engel (2004), 33–7.

lines from Book 2 of Ovid's *Fasti* (the story of Arion),¹⁸ but although Rilke later began work on translating Augustine's *Confessions*,¹⁹ it is tempting to see his difficulties with Latin – “I do have a fair grasp of the pieces in what is certainly a remarkable sentence, but I'm never going to be able to find the ‘intellectual connection’ [geistigen Band] this evening,” he wrote in a letter of 28 June 1911 when confronted with some Tacitus – as contributing to his sense of the fragmentary nature of the classical.²⁰ Much more important was Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) (see also below), whose *Birth of Tragedy* [Die Geburt der Tragödie], Rilke read in 1900, taking extensive notes.²¹ Nietzsche's distinction between the Apolline and the Dionysian, so influential at the turn of the century, seems to have led Rilke (not exactly as Nietzsche intended) to associate antiquity very strongly with the Apolline: with an aesthetics of surface, the primacy of form and plasticity; in short, with sculpture. Together with his strongly visual imagination, this probably explains why for Rilke it is archaeological traces, rather than textual ones, that give him the keenest sense of the endurance of the classical in the present.

3 The Apollo Sonnets

With its focus on clear outlines, turn towards tradition, avoidance of the subjective “I,” interest in sculpture and desire to be “concentrated, brief, well put together” (from a letter to Karl von der Heydt, July 10, 1906),²² it is possible to see Rilke's “new poetry” as a kind of neo-classicism. The classical is certainly prominent thematically as never before in his work – this owes something to the Louvre, where Rilke spent many hours, as well as to Rodin, who had a good collection of classical statuary. With it goes an interest in archaeology as a process of recovering things out of the depths of time and reconstituting them in and for the present. As we saw, both parts of the *New Poems* open with a sonnet on an ancient statue of Apollo (the second explicitly an archaic fragment) and continue with a sequence of poems on classical subjects. The first book also has a sequence of classical poems at the end which we shall come on to.

18 SW vii.920–5.

19 See SW vii.926–61.

20 Unpublished letter to Edith von Bonin, quoted in Zinn (1994), 337.

21 SW vi.1163–77.

22 Rilke (1986), 78.

The Apollo sonnets emphasize the archaic or early quality of the statues they can both be taken to represent (though in fact the first poem, "Early Apollo," makes no explicit reference to a sculpture). For both, appropriate statues have been identified from the Louvre. The poems are concerned with the connection between the remote past and the present/future and anticipate or represent the eruption of a past totality. "Early Apollo," which opens the first volume of *New Poems*, can be read as foreshadowing the poems to come in the collection as a whole:

Wie manches Mal durch das noch unbelaubte
 Gezweig ein Morgen durchsieht, der schon ganz
 im Frühling ist: so ist in seinem Haupte
 nichts was verhindern könnte, daß der Glanz

aller Gedichte uns fast tödlich träfe;
 denn noch kein Schatten ist in seinem Schauen,
 zu kühl für Lorbeer sind noch seine Schläfe
 und später erst wird aus den Augenbraun

hochstämmig sich der Rosengarten heben,
 aus welchem Blätter, einzeln, ausgelöst
 hintreiben werden auf des Mundes Beben,

der jetzt noch still ist, niegebraucht und blinkend
 und nur mit seinem Lächeln etwas trinkend
 als würde ihm sein Singen eingeflößt.

[As sometimes between still leafless branches
 a morning looks through that is already
 radiant with spring: so nothing in his head
 could obstruct the splendor of all poems

from striking us with almost lethal force;
 for there is still no shadow in his gaze,
 his temples are still too cool for laurel,
 and only later from his eyebrows' arches

will the rose garden lift up tall-stemmed,
 from which petals, one by one released
 will drift down upon his mouth's trembling,

which now is still quiet, never-used, and gleaming
and only drinking something with its smile
as though its song were being infused in him.]²³

The poem dwells in a potentiality which connects the “lethal” totality, the “splendour of all poems” represented by Apollo, with the single petals which are to come. It “tells the reader that there is a ground for the poet’s work,”²⁴ and the ground is the classical past and the possibility of working in a tradition. It also suggests that the totality can never actually emerge, that every poem will be an instance, that no poem can ever be that totality, which can only exist as an idea. The connection to antiquity becomes a way of summoning up the notion of a source which makes writing possible, even though the writing will only ever be a limited channeling.

“Archaic Torso of Apollo,” which opens the second volume of *New Poems* (dedicated to Rodin: “A mon grand Ami Auguste Rodin”) begins by acknowledging the distance between the present and the archaic past the statue comes from. Once it was whole, not a torso but a complete figure; now, it is a fragment, but one with unusual power:

Wir kannten nicht sein unerhörtes Haupt,
darin die Augenäpfel reiften. Aber
sein Torso glüht noch wie ein Kandelaber,
in dem sein Schauen, nur zurückgeschraubt,

sich hält und glänzt. Sonst könnte nicht der Bug
der Brust dich blenden, und im leisen Drehen
der Lenden könnte nicht ein Lächeln gehen
zu jener Mitte, die die Zeugung trug.

Sonst stünde dieser Stein entstellt und kurz
unter der Schultern durchsichtigem Sturz
und flimmerte nicht so wie Raubtierfelle;

und bräche nicht aus allen seinen Rändern
aus wie ein Stern: denn da ist keine Stelle,
die dich nicht sieht. Du mußt dein Leben ändern.

23 SW i.481; Rilke (1984), 5.

24 Phelan (1992), 43.

[We never knew his unheard-of head
 in which the pupils of his eyes could ripen. But
 his torso still glows like a candelabra,
 in which his gazing, turned down low,

holds fast and shines. Otherwise the prow
 of the breast could not blind you, nor a smile
 travel in a gentle turning of the loins
 toward that center where procreation thrived.

Otherwise the stone would stand deformed and curt
 under the shoulders' invisible plunge
 and not glisten just like wild beasts' fur;

and not burst forth from all its contours
 like a star: for there is no place
 that does not see you. You must change your life.]²⁵

The power comes from the nature of the artefact, that it is a piece of art whose surface is so beautifully worked that it seems to be inhabited by a sense of movement and rightness (imagined as light emanating from the statue). But it also comes from the fact that it is a fragment: what is missing is supplied by the contemplating mind and supplied more fully than the complete statue could itself have done. Surviving as a fragment from an archaic past, the torso brings with it a sense of wholeness and aliveness which reveals the incompleteness of our (modern) life. The observer/reader/poet draws the conclusion that their life is lacking. It is important to note that for this injunction to have force, the poem itself must be good enough to project the final words, since the reader is responding not to the statue but to the poem. The poem borrows from the statue's power, draws on the archaic source, hinting at the lost wholeness in its articulation of the sonnet form, but mimicking the fragmentariness of what has reached us by disrupting that form through much enjambement and (particularly in lines 4–8) internal rhyme and assonance, making the sonnet's lineaments hard to discern off the page. The flickering between the sense of the sonnet as whole and the sense of the sonnet as fragmented is, as in "Early Apollo," a reminder that poetry is matter of instances, not a pure untrammelled power. But the ability of the past to affect us, and the poem's ability to associate itself with and revive a potency from the past, are also affirmed.

25 SW i.557; Rilke (1987), 3 (adapted).

4 The Sappho Poems and Other “Classical” *New Poems*

“Early Apollo” and “Archaic Torso of Apollo” lead into a short sequence of poems with classical subjects in each of the two volumes of *New Poems* (though in the first with a transition via two other poems). In the first volume, there is a trio of poems to do with Sappho, one of which is styled a “fragment” and breaks off mid-sentence in imitation of the state of Sappho’s own surviving verses, “the golden lines with the beautiful, mighty breaks” [die goldenen Verse mit den schönen massiven Bruchstellen], as Rilke calls them in an essay on Anna de Noailles.²⁶ It is notable that even when dealing with textual tradition here Rilke treats the text as artefact, and emphasizes its fragmentary form.

In the second volume of *New Poems*, the group of “classical” poems is more various, and the sources range from statuary in the Louvre, to paintings, to texts including Callimachus, Ovid, and Homer. Some of these would have been quarried from a reference work Rilke made frequent use of and which he owned himself, though it was also in the reading room of the Bibliothèque nationale in Paris: the *General Encyclopedia of Sciences and Arts* [Allgemeine Encyclopädie der Wissenschaften und Künste] by J. S. Ersch and J. G. Gruber (Leipzig, 1818–1889).

Of more consequence are the four poems on classical themes at the end of the first volume of *New Poems*: “Hetaerae-Tombs” [Hetären-Gräber], “Orpheus. Eurydice. Hermes” [Orpheus. Eurydike. Hermes], “Alcestis” [Alkestis], and “Birth of Venus” [Geburt der Venus]. They are an oddity formally, being long narrative poems in blank verse, and three of them (all except “Alcestis”) were written in Rome in early 1904, well before any *New Poems* other than “The Panther” [Der Panther],²⁷ so are chronological and geographical outliers too. In some respects, they point beyond the *New Poems*, but in others they can be seen as something like its source, and also as a place where the project of the collection as a whole is reflected upon. That Rilke included them despite their formal difference may be taken as a sign of the importance of the classical element to his sense of the collection.

“Hetaerae-Tombs,” in sequence the first of these poems and apparently also the first to be written, is a particularly curious poem. It may derive from a site Rilke saw while in Rome, and it can be read as a kind of meditation on the meaning of archaeological remains, but it is probably largely invented. The hetaerae (meaning “companions” in Greek, a word used for women paid for sexual favors) are presented as having arrived on the shore of the present at the

26 SW vi.1016–20 (pp. 1016–17). On the Sappho poems, see Spörl (1999), 51–5.

27 “The Panther” was almost certainly written by the end of 1902.

end of a long journey, their eyes closed “as if to keep out too much distance,” their “smooth teeth” like the pieces of a traveler’s chess-set:

In ihren langen Haaren liegen sie
mit braunen, tief in sich gegangenen Gesichtern.
Die Augen zu wie vor zu vieler Ferne.
Skelette, Munde, Blumen. In den Munden
die glatten Zähne wie ein Reise-Schachspiel
aus Elfenbein in Reihen aufgestellt.
Und Blumen, gelbe Perlen, schlanke Knochen,
Hände und Hemden, welkende Gewebe
über dem eingestürzten Herzen. Aber
dort unter jenen Ringen, Talismanen
und augenblauen Steinen (Lieblings-Andenken)
steht noch die stille Krypta des Geschlechtes,
bis an die Wölbung voll mit Blumenblättern.
Und wieder gelbe Perlen [...]

[In their long hair they lie
with brown faces gone deep into themselves.
The eyes closed as if against too great a distance.
Skeletons, mouths, flowers. Inside the mouths
the smooth teeth like a pocket chess-set
lined up in ivory rows.
And flowers, yellow pearls, slender bones,
hands and tunics, fading fabric
above the caved-in heart. But
there beneath those rings, talismans,
and eye-blue stones (cherished keepsakes),
the silent crypt of the sex still stands,
filled to its vaulted roof with flower petals.
And again yellow pearls [...]]

lines 1–14²⁸

There is an odd mixing of the descriptive and the imaginary here. The bodies of the women are detailed along with the votive offerings and burial-objects in their graves, an amassing of pieces that is mirrored by the lack of verbs in all but the first and the twelfth lines quoted. The repetition of “mouths,” “flowers”

28 SW 1:540; Rilke (1984), 167 (slightly adapted, as also with the other quotations from this poem).

and “yellow pearls” which carries into later parts of the poem suggests, like the grammar and short incomplete sentences, that as these items have come to us, they are meaningless, a special kind of detritus from the past, no longer in any connection with one another. But the shift from the horizontal in line 1 (“they lie”) to the vertical in line 12 (“still stands”) indicates that the archaeology that this work of memory is performing on the women restores them to a present. The “silent crypt of the sex [...] / filled to its vaulted roof with flower petals” seems to evoke a potent sexuality which has somehow survived time and the decay of flesh. This fullness, within the economy of the collection, recalls the potency of “Early Apollo,” the book’s opening poem, in which “the splendour of all poems” [der Glanz / aller Gedichte] lies waiting to emerge as “petals, one by one.”²⁹ There thus forms an association between poetry and sexuality which has some resonance elsewhere in the collection. “Hetaerae-Tombs” resumes its downward survey of the bodies from hair (line 1) to ankle (line 33) with a long sequence of accumulated nouns without main verbs – a jumble of figurines, brooches, phials and amulets – which leaves the “silent crypt” oddly prominent, a seemingly unique locus of meaning amid an antiquarian mass of fragments and trinkets:

So liegen sie mit Dingen angefüllt,
kostbaren Dingen, Steinen, Spielzeug, Hausrat,
zerschlagnem Tand (was alles in sie abfiel),
und dunkeln wie der Grund von einem Fluß.

[Thus they lie filled up with things,
precious things, jewels, toys, utensils,
shattered knick-knacks (all that dropped off into them),
and darken like the bottom of a river.]

lines 34–7

These lines sum up the miscellany of what has gone before and also emphasize the present: “and darken like the bottom of a river.” This “darkening” seems not to point to the brown faces mentioned in the opening lines, an effect of the passing of time, but as an active verb to contrast with the grave-objects and suggest a hidden potency again (“darken” consorts with “crypt”). This power apparently has to do with the courtesans’ past lives, with the erotic attraction they used to exert. In the phrase “They were river-beds” [Flußbetten waren

29 See Phelan’s fine readings ((1992), 36–43 and 56–9) of both these poems.

sie] (line 38), the first line of the next stanza, the graves are converted into river-beds in a way which recalls "Roman Sarcophagi."³⁰

The imagery of river-beds entered the poem as part of a simile (line 37) and now intensifies into metaphor (line 38). As it does so, the poem itself leaves its "things" behind it, the objects that lie alongside and among the women's bodies, leaves its occasion and leads us out into something which is hard to describe but which is now marked by verbs and fluent syntax. On the face of it, it has the lives of the hetaerae in mind, the many boys and men who passed over them. Against the lifeless objects – bones, clay, broken glass – that have made it into the present as vestiges is set a vision of coursing, coherent life in the classical past – an evocation of sexuality both masculine and feminine. But a connection with the earlier part of the poem is maintained through the images of falling, which began with the things that "fell into them" (line 36) and continues with the "youths" and "boys" who ran as tributaries into the hetaerae's flow: "and played with the things on the bottom, / until the slope gripped their feeling" [und spielten mit den Dingen auf dem Grunde, / bis das Gefälle ihr Gefühl ergriff] (lines 45–6). To come upon the "things" here is disorienting, and "their feeling" might refer to either the boys' or the hetaerae's feelings, but the pronoun in the final stanza seems clearly to mean the women again, or the women as river-beds, who, like the living waters of "Roman Sarcophagi," now reflect their surroundings, filling, clarifying and broadening in an experience that seems intended to suggest, or encompass, female orgasm:

Dann füllten sie mit flachem klaren Wasser
die ganze Breite dieses breiten Weges
und trieben Wirbel an den tiefen Stellen;
und spiegelten zum ersten Mal die Ufer
und ferne Vogelrufe –, während hoch
die Sternennächte eines süßen Landes
in Himmel wuchsen, die sich nirgends schlossen.

[Then they filled with shallow clear water
the entire breadth of that wide course
and made eddies swirl at the deep places;
and mirrored for the first time the shore,
and distant birdcalls –, while high up
the starry nights of a sweet country
blossomed into heavens that nowhere closed.]

lines 47–53

30 See above, p. 211.

Instead of the decomposed bodies lying among a clutter of disparate objects we find a system of correspondences reaching out to the river-banks, the sound of birds, and the expanding cosmos of the stars. The poem has gone beneath the traces left in the present and discovered a lost past, the implication being that this can be regained as a glimpse by the work of poetry, which is thus both aligned with and set against archaeology. The poem's imagining recovers a meaning hidden behind the accumulation of things, and unearths something archaeology cannot, but it still needs these artefacts to begin and move on from, and it is the form of the tombs which suggests the river-beds.

Alluding to other *New Poems* as it does and containing its own “collection” of things (some of which are to be found in other poems) “Hetaerae-Tombs” can, as Phelan suggests, be read as a kind of *mise-en-abyme* of the book as a whole.³¹ That means that antiquity and the archaeological are an intrinsic part of the collection and that we could see the influence of the classical in more than just those poems which have obviously classical preoccupations. The classical and its possible survival in the present is a particularly pressing instance of our relationship with the past in general. Is it just a repository of fragments, or can it become, and act as, an integral part of life? “Hetaerae-Tombs” seems to tell, or want to tell, a story in which the dry remnants, what has come down to us, can give us access to a wholeness which comes from connecting, if only in the imagination, the present and the past.

Such questions are already being raised in “Orpheus. Eurydice. Hermes,” a poem whose myth can be regarded as central to the *New Poems* and its preoccupations, since it is about the possibility of recovery. Like “Hetaerae-Tombs” and “Birth of Venus,” it was written in Rome in 1904. Rilke certainly knew Ovid and perhaps also Virgil (there is no evidence he did, and he seems never to mention him), but the immediate inspiration for the poem came from a Greek relief he was familiar with from Roman copies in Naples, in Rome, and in the Louvre. (He never traveled to Greece itself, though he considered it, and felt that his time on Capri, where he wintered in 1907 and 1908, gave him a strong notion of what Greece was like).³² Only in the relief is Hermes part of the myth, so this representation is crucial and gives the poem an archaeological origin, back behind the later literary sources, which perhaps influences its literal imagining of the underworld as a geological space beneath the ground as well as its interest in etymology. Orpheus seeks to unearth Eurydice, but she is too deeply rooted. The order in which the figures appear in the title (with points between hinting at the interpuncts of an inscription) is also that of the relief

31 Phelan (1992), 58.

32 A poem he wrote on Capri but never published, “Kore,” has its title in Greek letters in the manuscript: see SW ii.340 and 782.

when viewed right to left and so Eurydice finds herself in the in-between position; but in the poem itself Rilke presents them as Orpheus, Hermes, Eurydice, both in the main part and in the coda (lines 87–95), where Orpheus looks back on Hermes turning to follow Eurydice who is already retracing her steps. That is, Hermes, the intermediary, is always in the way, firmly between them. On the stele, Orpheus and Eurydice face one another in intimacy and perhaps sorrow, hands touching. This is usually taken to be the final parting, Eurydice now twice lost – the only details clearly carried across into the poem are that Orpheus holds a lyre hanging by his side in his left hand (see lines 21–2) and that Hermes has Eurydice in *his* left (line 46).

Rilke's poem begins abruptly, with an astonishing and disorienting metaphor which also contains an inverted (or anastrophic) genitive, one of several glancing at the poem's preoccupation with turning round:

Das war der Seelen wunderliches Bergwerk.
Wie stille Silbererze gingen sie
als Adern durch sein Dunkel. Zwischen Wurzeln
entsprang das Blut, das fortgeht zu den Menschen,
und schwer wie Porphyr sah es aus im Dunkel.
Sonst war nichts Rotes.

[That was the souls' strange mine.
Like silent silver ore they wandered
through its dark like veins. Between roots
the blood welled up that makes its way to men,
and it looked hard as porphyry in the dark.
Nothing else was red.]

lines 1–6³³

The underworld is imagined as a mine, creating the sense both of something continuous with the world of the living and of something that can be exploited, a source. The genitive “der Seelen” is finely poised, suggesting that the souls, who may simply be the dead but could also include the living, both inhabit the mine and *are* the mine. As shades they inhabit it, thread it like veins of silver ore; as living souls they draw sustenance from it, it makes them what they are, as is suggested by the “roots” and the flow of blood to the human world. In keeping with this, the poem seems to generate its own meaning, as

33 SW 1.542; Rilke (1984), 171 (slightly adapted, as also with the other quotations from this poem).

“veins,” used first in the geological sense, in its physiological sense produces “blood.” The blood is then referred back to the geological when it is compared to porphyry. So there is (already) a toing and froing here, and while a connexion between the mineral world and the human one is suggested the lines resist positive elucidation and their mode remains tersely enigmatic: “Nothing else was red.”

We see the figures of the poem, initially, as if looking down into the poem, or back into the mine of the past: “And on this single path they came” [Und dieses eines Weges kamen sie] (line 15). We watch the figures come up towards us, from the position Orpheus will adopt at the end, looking back. We see him in front, and gradually, chiefly through indirect speech, we slip into his perspective, which is to say that we turn round, which is what Orpheus must not do but is always thinking of (lines 25–8, 38). By contrast, we never slip into Eurydice’s perspective during the long section devoted to her (lines 57–86), though we do very briefly in the closing lines when she sees but does not recognize him (lines 87–9), before we switch into Orpheus’ again. Orpheus is evoked in terms that utterly contradict those used for Eurydice: he is “split in two” [entzweit] (line 24), whereas she is “within herself” [in sich] (lines 60 and 63); “impatient” [ungeduldig] (line 17), where she is “without impatience” [ohne Ungeduld] (lines 59 and 95); has forgotten himself as poet – his hands “no longer know” the lyre he is carrying (line 21) – and hears not just his voice but *himself* echoing away (line 35), whereas she is totally autonomous, even tautologous (“her having died / filled her like fullness” [ihr Gestorbensein / erfüllte sie wie Fülle], lines 63–4), unalterably herself. She is described as being at once pregnant (line 60) and newly virgin (line 68). She can embody and contain opposites, whereas Orpheus is divided by them, all too human, and all too modern. We are repeatedly told that she “understood nothing” (lines 67 and 86) – and she has no need to, since her being is complete. Although she is said to be “going” like the others (line 57), that is not her true state – she is “uncertain” [unsicher] (lines 59 and 95) because she is not used to movement and having a direction.³⁴ Her verb is “sein,” “to be.” Whereas Orpheus attracts a wide range of verbs, Eurydice always reverts to the same one and the same form: “was,” which was used first of the mine. She is full of being and pastness, pastness *as* being, or as Rilke puts it, full of her death: “Like a fruit full of sweetness and dark, / she was full of her own great death” [Wie eine Frucht von Süßigkeit und Dunkel, / so war sie voll von ihrem großen Tode] (lines 65–6). Her darkness is that of the mine. She is part of her world and cannot be removed. She is, as Rilke says in another astonishing phrase which again takes a word from

34 Cf. Bradley (1967), 156.

the poem's opening, "already root," deep and earthy. "She was already root" [Sie war schon Wurzel] (line 82) is entirely made of words already used in the poem, and "already" (lines 75, 79, 82, 93) marks Eurydice out as intensely as the verb "was."

Eurydice is introduced via a stanza in the poem's middle which looks back out of the narrative to the "world out of lament" produced by Orpheus' poems after her death:

Die So-geliebte, daß aus einer Leier
mehr Klage kam als je aus Klagefrauen;
daß eine Welt aus Klage ward, in der
alles noch einmal da war: Wald und Tal
and Weg und Ortschaft, Feld und Fluß und Tier;
und daß um diese Klage-Welt, ganz so
wie um die andre Erde, eine Sonne
und ein gestirnter stiller Himmel ging,
ein Klage-Himmel mit entstellten Sternen –:
Diese So-geliebte.

[The one so loved, that out of one lyre
more lament came than ever from lamenting women;
that a world came out of lament, in which
everything once more appeared: wood and vale
and road and village, field and flock and stream;
and that around this lament-world, just as
around the other earth, a sun
and a star-filled silent heaven turned,
a lament-heaven with disfigured stars –:
this one so loved.]

lines 47–56³⁵

The whole stanza, which dwells on the force of Orpheus' poetry as released by Eurydice's death, though framed by reference to her ("The one so loved" [Die So-geliebte]) doesn't actually contain reference to her at all, and this seems to suggest that Orpheus' poems derive from and depend on her *absence*. To come and fetch her then is a fundamental error, but perhaps also a necessary one. To go beyond what poetry is capable of, to try and exceed its limits, is part of what makes it what it is. In this version, Orpheus has to turn, not just because the

35 SW i.544; Rilke (1984), 173–5.

myth demands it, but because loss is the premise of poetry and a condition of the presence it can achieve. Though the turn to the past is seen as a condition of poetry, there is no great faith in actual passage between the past and the present. Nevertheless, “Orpheus. Eurydice. Hermes” achieves a reanimation and thus continuation of the myth. The poem is ample evidence that the classical can still function as a source, perhaps *because* we have lost it.

Rilke’s preoccupation, in what is known as his “middle” period – the time of the *New Poems* and the influence of Rodin – with turning experience into well-wrought poems, poems with a finish and closedness which allows them to stand in for the things they devote themselves to, receives a certain upbraiding in “Orpheus. Eurydice. Hermes,” which seems to point out the impossibility of capturing something which is already dissipated and dispersed: “already loosened like long hair / and given over like fallen rain / and handed out like limitless supplies” (Snow’s translation of the famous lines characterizing Eurydice: “schon aufgelöst wie langes Haar / und hingegeben wie gefallner Regen / und ausgeteilt wie hundertfacher Vorrat”).

5 *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*

The completion of the two volumes of the *New Poems* was closely followed by Rilke’s novel *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* [Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge] (1910) – a book which not only pursues the interest in Sappho but also contains an unusually emphatic reflection on antiquity and its relation to the present. Reading Sappho – it is made quite explicit that antiquity is here being transmitted by the written word rather than by non-textual artefacts – the figure who is one of Malte’s many *alter egos* feels that he “had never been so sure of antiquity”:

Fast möchte er der Generationen lächeln, die sie [= die Antike] beweint haben wie ein verlorenes Schauspiel, in dem sie gerne aufgetreten wären. Nun begreift er momentan die dynamische Bedeutung jener frühen Welteinheit, die etwas wie ein neues, gleichzeitiges Aufnehmen aller menschlichen Arbeit war. Es beirrt ihn nicht, daß jene konsequente Kultur mit ihren gewissermaßen vollzähligen Versichtbarungen für viele spätere Blicke eine Ganzes zu bilden schien und ein im Ganzen Vergangenes. Zwar ward dort wirklich des Lebens himmlische Hälfte an die halbrunde Schale des Daseins gepaßt, wie zwei volle Hemisphären zu einer heilen, goldenen Kugel zusammengehen. Doch dies war kaum geschehen, so empfanden die in ihr eingeschlossenen Geister diese

restlose Verwirklichung nur noch als Gleichnis; das massive Gestirn verlor an Gewicht und stieg auf in den Raum, und in seiner goldenen Rundung spiegelte sich zurückhaltend die Traurigkeit dessen, was noch nicht zu bewältigen war.

[He could almost smile at those generations that wept for it as for a lost play they would have liked to have parts in. Now he grasps in an instant the dynamic significance of that early unity that was in the world, that new and simultaneous gathering-in of all that humankind laboured at, as it were. It does not trouble him that that civilization, which was all of a piece and had an almost total capacity to make manifest, has appeared to many in later ages to form a whole and to be wholly past. It is true that there the celestial half of life really was fitted to the semicircular bowl of earthly existence, as two full hemispheres fit together to make one perfect golden orb. But scarcely had this occurred than the spirits confined within it felt that this complete realization was no more than a likeness; the massive heavenly body grew weightless and rose into space, and its golden sphere hesitantly reflected the sadness of all that could not yet be mastered.]³⁶

There is something marvelously untroubled about this. Perfection and wholeness inhere in antiquity, but not as something forever lost and not as a crushing weight bearing down on modernity. The work of antiquity remains to be done, the “golden orb” of perfection is “only a likeness.” Instead of burdening us with a sense that there is nothing left to do (a danger confronted by Hölderlin in his unfinished essay, “The Standpoint from which we should consider Antiquity” [Der Gesichtspunkt aus dem wir das Altertum anzusehen haben]),³⁷ antiquity does precisely the opposite: it gives us a measure of all there is to be done. There is nothing stifling about it, it enables: “Around all that has been perfected,” Malte’s persona continues, “rises what is yet to be achieved, and intensifies” [Um alles Fertige steigt das Ungetane und steigert sich].³⁸

Rilke felt something comparable about his *New Poems*: their contours and close-fitting structure, their general desire to be like statues, for all their achievement, did not lead to stasis, but to a sense of what more there was to be done. And in this, unlike his attitude to antiquity in *Malte*, he tended to see the mode of the *New Poems* as deficient because it excluded too much,

36 SW vi.928–9; Rilke (2009), 154 (translation adapted).

37 In Hölderlin (2009), 246–7.

38 SW vi.929; Rilke (2009), 155 (adapted).

notably the kind of inquiry into the nature of the self conducted in *Malte*. He is not any less interested in phenomena and in experience, but from about 1910 Rilke moved towards a different kind of poetry, a more exploratory mode which emphasized openness and uncertainty, and though he drew on many different sources to help him with this, classical elements remained key, often mediated through more immediate sources. It is part of a turn in Rilke's writing towards poetic tradition, with proportionally less influence from visual art and artefacts, though they are still important.

6 Nietzsche and Hölderlin

Nietzsche is probably a subterranean presence throughout Rilke's work, and an early reading of the second essay of his *Untimely Meditations* [Unzeitgemässe Betrachtungen], “On the Advantages and Disadvantages of History for Life” [Vom Nutzen und Nachteil der Historie für das Leben], with its dismissal of an “antiquarian” attitude to the past, seems to have been fundamental. Nietzsche's essay is founded on a distinction between ancient Greeks and modern Germans, where the Greeks stand for embodied knowledge, with everything flowing into “life,” and the Germans are “walking encyclopedias,”³⁹ accumulating knowledge without knowing what to do with it.

But more specific currents from antiquity, helping Rilke move on from the mode of the *New Poems*, can be found in his engagement with Hölderlin, via whom classical measures and a wider sense of what the poem might be integrate themselves into Rilke's verse. Rilke's reading of Hölderlin owed much to Norbert von Hellingrath, the editor of the first edition of Hölderlin's works to take the translations of Pindar and Sophocles and the late hymnic fragments seriously. Hellingrath, whom Rilke got to know in Munich in 1910, was a classical philologist by training, and wrote his dissertation on Hölderlin's Pindar translations.⁴⁰ It is likely that Rilke's first acquaintance with Hölderlin came in the shape of these translations, which Hellingrath published in Stefan George's periodical *Blätter für die Kunst* (Art Pages) in February 1910 and gave to Rilke in November in Paris. Hölderlin's Pindar represents a radical uprooting of German, opening it into an expressive potential which was quite new, and it has been argued that these translations influenced the language of the first two *Duino Elegies*.⁴¹

39 Nietzsche (1997), 79.

40 See their correspondence: Rilke and von Hellingrath (2008).

41 See Beißner (1936), 38. The first two *Elegies* were written in early 1912.

Hölderlin's method was to cleave to the word-order of the Greek as closely as possible, forcing the German language into an estrangement where its breaking down sometimes assumes the lineaments of a new poetic idiom. In his dissertation, which Hellingrath gave to Rilke when it was published the following year, he drew on a rhetorical distinction between "hard and smooth composition" [harte und glatte Fügung], borrowed from Dionysius of Halicarnassus, to characterize an effect in Pindar which was sharpened in Hölderlin's translation. The distinction is between a "smooth," unobtrusive style in regular syntax and a "hard" or abrupt style which breaks the expected relationships between words and favors unusual collocations with a fractured, abbreviated syntax.⁴²

This tallies with shifts occurring in Rilke's own language and seems to have encouraged him to push them further. There is evidence that Rilke, besides the Pindar translations, also paid attention to Hölderlin's versions of Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* and *Antigone*, together with the esoteric but fascinating notes appended to them, since, on July 24, 1914, not long before receiving the volume of Hellingrath's edition which contained the most important of the poems, he wrote to Hellingrath that he had been spending the last few months reading the existing volumes "with particular emotion and absorption" [mit besonderer Bewegung und Hingabe].⁴³ Of the two volumes then available, that with the translations is far more likely to have been of interest, since the other volume contains only very early poems and letters. There are traces of this reading in Rilke's poem "To Hölderlin" [An Hölderlin] written September-October 1914.

The renewal of Rilke's poetic diction, and his new conception of what he was aiming for as a poet, thus draw on classical precedents as channeled through Hölderlin, who was the poet in the German tradition for whom Greek antiquity had the most significance. Much of his work is in German equivalents of classical meters, and some of this finds its way into Rilke's writing, though only as fragments, as if Rilke were picking up a lilt or signature, a new tune or movement, rather than consciously composing work in any particular form. Roughly, there is a shift towards free verse in which classical rhythms are common, but it is a tentative and experimental shift rather than anything more conclusive.

7 *Duino Elegies*

Rilke's *Duino Elegies* [Duineser Elegien], begun in 1912 but not completed until 1922, have somehow deflected attention when it comes to examining Rilke for

42 See the excerpts from Hellingrath's dissertation in Rilke and Hellingrath (2008), 49–50.

43 See Rilke and Hellingrath (2008), 97.

classical provocations, and Uwe Spörl has even made the astonishing claim that there is “only one reference to antiquity” to be found there.⁴⁴ It is true that their use of the elegiac form does not derive directly from any classical source and instead looks back to Goethe and Hölderlin. But a comparable mediation is a feature of most of Rilke’s reception of antiquity, especially when the transmission is textual. The *Duino Elegies* are elegies both in the sense of a lament (broadly, for the human condition) and in the more technical and classical sense that they borrow formally from the elegiac distich. This is not just an incidental aspect, but crucial to their composition and meaning. The fragmentary presence of elegiacs, their haunting of the cycle, create a depth and resonance against which the diagnosis of the modern condition can unfold, as well as suggesting the gap between an imagined wholeness in the past and what we can now recover of it. The dactylic tremor that runs through most of the poems, the odd lines that assume for a moment the shape of a whole hexameter, are part of what allows the *Elegies* to range so widely. These measures inhabit the poems in the way the past inhabits and nourishes, but also condemns, the present, articulating a broken tradition. The *Elegies* contain many perspectives onto our present, many ways of helping our lives appear as what they are. The angels are the most prominent, but the metrical echos, the covert hint at the classical background, are perhaps as important. And this is the first time that Rilke takes any formal orientation from antiquity, however oblique it may be.

The “one reference” Spörl allows is to the myth of Linos at the end of the First Elegy, which relates the birth of music out of lament for his death, a tilting of “emptiness” [Leere] into “vibration” [Schwingung] that prefigures the course of the cycle as a whole:

Ist die Sage umsonst, daß einst in der Klage um Linos
wagende erste Musik dürre Erstarrung durchdrang;
daß erst im erschrockenen Raum, dem ein beinah göttlicher Jüngling
plötzlich für immer enttrat, das Leere in jene
Schwingung geriet, die uns jetzt hinreißt und tröstet und hilft.

[Is the legend in vain that once, in lament for Linos,
daring first music broke barren numbness,
that only in terrified space, which a youth who was almost a god
suddenly left for ever, emptiness swung into that
vibration which charms and consoles and helps us now.]

lines 90–end⁴⁵

44 In Engel (2004), 36.

45 SW i.688; Rilke (2015), 63.

Rilke's version of the myth is a re-invention of it which corresponds to no particular source, but the poem reaches back to it to instate the idea of loss transmuting into fullness and the idea that this music "consoles and helps us now." The precise contours of the myth are devised to suit the poem's needs here, but the summoning of classical example in a very prominent position at the end of the opening Elegy itself sets the framework for the cycle, making the remembering of a classical-mythical past a key element in our negotiation and interpretation of the present. It means that the other moments in the *Elegies* that can be taken as classical references are picked out and acquire more point than they would otherwise have – not to speak of the way the vestigial elegiac form itself is foregrounded, since *Linus*, besides a name, is a word for a sort of "old song," either a cheerful one sung "at the vintage," or a "mournful" one.⁴⁶ It is elegy itself, as a form in which mourning and celebration are intertwined, like in the *Duino Elegies* and in the German tradition of the classical elegy on which they draw.⁴⁷

The Second Elegy also contains a substantial, and similarly abrupt, classical allusion, again prominently occupying the poem's final lines. The impression created in both cases is of the example of antiquity, or select instances of it, being reached back to and placed alongside "our" insufficiencies, providing quite literally the measure against which our longings and failings can be discerned and understood. In the Second Elegy, it is a question of gestures:

Erstaunte euch nicht auf attischen Stelen die Vorsicht
menschlicher Geste? war nicht Liebe und Abschied
so leicht auf die Schultern gelegt, als wär es aus anderm
Stoffe gemacht als bei uns? Gedenkt euch der Hände,
wie sie drucklos beruhen, obwohl in den Torsen die Kraft steht.
Diese Beherrschten wußten damit: so weit sind wirs,
dieses ist unser, uns *so* zu berühren; stärker
stemmen die Götter uns an. Doch dies ist Sache der Götter.

[Did not the caution of human gesture on Attic stelae
surprise you? Were love and farewell not placed so lightly
on shoulders as if they were wrought of a substance other
than we use? Remember the hands, how they rest without pressure
although there stands strength in the torsos. By that

46 See the entry "Linus" in Hornblower and Spawforth (1996).

47 On this tradition, see Ziolkowski (1980).

they knew, those who mastered themselves: so far it is us,
 thus to touch one another is ours; the gods
 urge us more forcibly onwards. But that is concern of the gods.]

lines 66–73⁴⁸

The carving on the stelae gives an image of the limits which the ancients knowingly inhabited, liberated rather than constrained by them. The poem closes by making explicit the comparison between us moderns and “those” ancients. The whole business and difficulty of life is simplified to the question of how to temper our yearnings, how to find a home for our sense of ourselves as reaching beyond ourselves:

[...] Denn das eigene Herz übersteigt uns
 noch immer wie jene. Und wir können ihm nicht mehr
 nachschaun in Bilder, die es besänftigen, noch in
 göttliche Körper, in denen es größer sich mäßigt.

[...] For our heart still transcends us
 as theirs did. And we can no longer gaze after it
 into images soothing it, not into god-like
 bodies in which it assumes a superior restraint.]

lines 76–end⁴⁹

The heart is made to carry a lot of weight here, but its movements are not held to be fundamentally different across the ages. Comparison is possible, and it seems to show that whereas the heart has not changed, the ability to soothe or control it, to represent it, has. The idea of classical measure, as something which we now lack, is still current, and throws our own condition into relief.

After the first two Elegies, which were written in close succession as a first movement of the cycle and of its composition, the classical references are less marked, but the importance of the classical has been definitively established, and it is maintained by the dactylic pulse which even makes itself felt in those Elegies (the Fourth and the Eighth) that are written in blank verse. Minor and more conventional allusions occur, such as to Neptune in the Third Elegy or to Leda and the swan in the Sixth or to Daphne at the beginning of the Ninth, but to fasten on these is to miss the point: they are reminders of the underlying

48 SW i.691–2; Rilke (2015), 65.

49 SW i.692; Rilke (2015), 66.

presence of antiquity as an ongoing aspect of the present, part of Rilke's literary culture of course, but suggesting a sense of time and place for which the past is far from over. It has been rightly said that the Sixth Elegy, whose subject is heroes, and which begins with the close observation of a fig-tree, is "full of ancient spirit."⁵⁰ And the Seventh contains a more extended reflection on the relationship of the modern "Zeitgeist" (line 55) to antiquity which reverts to the language of the "heart" (line 57). Whereas the Greeks built an objective correlative to their hearts' metaphysical desires in temples, "we" can no longer do so, but "build internally," and potentially "more splendidly" [größer] instead (lines 62). Rilke explicitly points out that where traces of antiquity have remained – fragments of temples, for example – their ritual purpose has vanished, which is to say that their real existence has become "invisible" (line 60): they have survived as a beautiful shell. Where the Greeks had stone, we have only words, a form in keeping with what Rilke identifies as an historical tendency towards abstraction, which he calls "invisibility." The temples, and other concrete vestiges of ancient life, remind us that whereas we cannot construct meaning *like* the Greeks we still have need of an equivalent activity. Towards the end of the cycle, and especially of course in the Tenth Elegy, this construction of an "inner" world, a landscape of the imagination, is focused on imagery from ancient Egypt, and this is probably the main reason why the place of classical antiquity in the *Duino Elegies* tends to be overlooked.⁵¹

8 *The Sonnets to Orpheus* and Alfred Schuler

The existence, even across difference, of a connection running from antiquity into the present, which the *Duino Elegies* consider, and in fact depend on, is affirmed in a sonnet which was written at the same time as those making up the Second Part of the *Sonnets to Orpheus*, but not included amongst them. It is a poem which thinks about inheritance and returns again to the aqueducts as images of tradition. The final tercet picks up the poem's governing focus on fountains:

Sind wir auch anders, als die, denen noch Feste gelangen,
dieser leistende Strahl, der uns als Stärke entquillt,
ist über große, zu uns, Aquädukte gegangen.

⁵⁰ Kippenberg (1942), 319: "antiken Geistes voll."

⁵¹ The chief exception is Kohlschmidt (1948).

[Even if we are other than those who could still have festivals,
the force of this jet, which streams from us as strength,
has travelled, to us, by way of great aqueducts.]⁵²

The final line in German gets the broken connection, or the linked disparity, in a syntax not readily translatable into English and very odd in German, where “to us” [zu uns] intervenes between adjective and noun. There is a break, but there is also a flow. This view, of a connecting stream still coming to us from antiquity, was one Rilke was helped to, or certainly confirmed in, by “the extremely curious figure of Alfred Schuler” [la figure extrêmement curieuse d’Alfred Schuler], in Walter Benjamin’s words.⁵³ The preoccupation with “festivals” in this poem, as a characteristic of life in antiquity, also comes from him. Alfred Schuler (1865–1923), whom Rilke himself called “this magical-peculiar person,”⁵⁴ was well-known in Munich in the war years, and Rilke attended his lectures in 1915 and 1917–1918. They made a great impression on him, as they did on many others, and Schuler was generally taken to be a living embodiment of Roman antiquity, one “whose feeling and knowledge are in contact via as it were subterranean channels with that particular moment in history” (i.e., imperial Rome), as Rilke put it to Marianne Mitford in a letter of March 5, 1915.⁵⁵ Schuler’s ideas, which were influenced by Nietzsche and Johann Jakob Bachofen (1814–1887), overlap with Rilke’s at several points, but they were of special import for the *Sonnets to Orpheus*, which Rilke claimed that Schuler would have understood in every detail. He associates their manner with him: the facility he acquired in them to utter things “so openly and secretly at once” may, he suggests to Clara Rilke in a letter of April 23, 1923,⁵⁶ have derived from his contact or “touch” [Berührung] with Schuler, the implication being that the “intuitive insight” that survived in Schuler had in some sense been passed on to him as if by contagion, or as a gift is passed from master to apprentice. The interest in the Orphic mysteries and in the chthonic, which are a significant aspect of the *Sonnets to Orpheus*, received at least some nourishment from Schuler.⁵⁷ They share a world-view which sees “the dead as those who

52 SW ii.468. The translation is mine.

53 Benjamin (1977), 229. This essay, in French, was originally written for, but not published by *La Nouvelle Revue française*.

54 In a letter to Marie von Thurn und Taxis, January 18, 1920; quoted in Schnack (2009), 668.

55 Quoted in Schnack (2009), 493.

56 Rilke (1991), ii.301–03.

57 Holzkamp (2000) argues convincingly that Schuler reinforced certain notions Rilke already held rather than furnishing him with new ones. The main account of Rilke and

truly have being, the realm of the dead as a unique and tremendous existence, and our brief period of life as a kind of exception to it" (to Marie von Thurn und Taxis, March 18, 1915).⁵⁸ Orpheus inhabits and indeed *is* the "double realm" [Doppelbereich] (a word from the ninth sonnet in the First Part of the *Sonnets to Orpheus*) which does not distinguish between life and death, and as such he stands for an antiquity which contrasts with the divisions associated with Christianity. There is a sense in which Orpheus is brought back to life in the *Sonnets*, the continued valency of his myth is revealed, and not so much in the poems which refer to the familiar aspects of the story – the charming of trees and animals in the opening sonnet, or his dismemberment at the hands of the Maenads in the sonnet that closes the First Part – as in the musicality and creative abundance of the whole sequence. In the *Sonnets to Orpheus*, Rilke is not just making use of classical material, or even returning to a tradition; he is advancing a further phase of the myth, extending the Orphic voice, in what has provocatively been called "an extraordinary spurt of energy and fertility in the living organism."⁵⁹

9 "To Us You Are the Full Numberless Flower"

Maintaining the channels leading back to antiquity is one of the functions of the *Sonnets to Orpheus*. We can see it in the poem about the rose (Poem 6 in the Second Part):

Rose, du thronende, denen im Altertume
warst du ein Kelch mit einfachem Rand.
Uns aber bist du die volle zahllose Blume,
der unerschöpfliche Gegenstand.

In deinem Reichtum scheinst du wie Kleidung um Kleidung
um einen Leib aus nichts als Glanz;
aber dein einzelnes Blatt ist zugleich die Vermeidung
und die Verleugnung jedes Gewands.

Schuler in English is by Volker Durr (2006), 114–22. But Durr makes no reference to the existing literature on the subject and has no evidence for his key claim that Rilke first came across Schuler's ideas when he was in Munich "between 1896 and 1897" and "nursed" them for "almost twenty years" (Durr (2006), 119). See also Plumpe (1988).

58 Rilke (1991), ii.566.

59 Sewell (1960), 372.

Seit Jahrhunderten ruft uns dein Duft
seine süßesten Namen herüber;
plötzlich liegt er wie Ruhm in der Luft.

Dennoch, wir wissen ihn nicht zu nennen, wir raten ...
Und Erinnerung geht zu ihm über,
die wir von rufbaren Stunden erbat.

[Rose, enthroned, to those in antiquity
you were a cup with a single rim.
To *us* you are the full numberless flower,
the inexhaustible thing.

Opulent rose, like robes upon robes
about a body of nothing but lustre,
each single petal yet an evasion
and a disowning of any attire.

For centuries has your fragrance been calling
its sweetest names across to us here;
it suddenly hangs like fame in the air.

Even so, we can't name it, we guess ...
And recollection goes out to meet it,
granted by hours we still can re-call.]⁶⁰

To this, Rilke added a note: “The ancient rose was a simple ‘eglantine,’ red and yellow, in the colours that occur in a flame. It flowers in one or two gardens here, in the Valais” [Die antike Rose war eine einfache “Eglantine,” rot und gelb, in den Farben, die in der Flamme vorkommen. Sie blüht hier, im Wallis, in einzelnen Gärten].⁶¹ The poem thus starts from a trace of antiquity which has endured, a reminder that what “we” think of when we think of “rose” is now different. The modern “complex” rose was cultivated out of the original simplex, meaning that the rose stands now as a symbol both of common ground and of difference. Its scent is at once a link back to our childhood and to antiquity “centuries” ago, for which it was just as evocative. It connects us back to ourselves and back to our cultural sources as memory reaches to where

60 SW i.754; Rilke (2015), 103 (slightly adapted).

61 SW i.772–3.

knowledge cannot (the German here is “wir wissen ihn nicht zu nennen” – “we do not know how to name it [the scent]”). To address a rose in this way is to make a connection between the past and the present, to allow the passage of (poetic) memory between source and the profusion which flows from it. The poem does not forget the distinction – the manifold petals of the “full” cultivar as against the simple sweet-briar – but focusses on the scent they share.

10 Rilke's French Poems

On learning of Schuler's death, Rilke relates in his letter to Clara Rilke already quoted (April 23, 1923), how he placed in his memory “a few just opened narcissi [...] on the altar of the abandoned country chapel” near Muzot in the Valais, adding that the chapel, fallen now into disuse, “has been returned to all the gods.”⁶² In his Valais years, where he lived from 1921 until his death in 1926, Rilke, after the completion of the *Duino Elegies* and the *Sonnets to Orpheus* in 1922, composed a great deal of verse in French. The pagan implications of the memorial gesture and of his understanding of the chapel find a counterpart in these poems, where – especially in the collection *Orchards* [Vergers] – classical divinities are frequent, as is also a pagan relish for simply being in the world.⁶³ A late German poem, “Now It Is Time” [Jetzt wär es Zeit], summons the gods, the “sleepers in things,” to step out of them and inaugurate a new beginning, a “new breathfield.”⁶⁴ Rilke achieved this new beginning in his French poems, which were partly written in tribute to the French-speaking landscape in which he now lived and which he seems to have experienced as an ancient and pagan place reverting, like the chapel, to a sort of pantheistic openness, an Orphic space where the everyday and the sacred are interchangeable and interspersed. The orchards, like the poems that speak them, are such spaces, ancient and open, a blend of nature and cultivation, airy places that can accommodate the gods even in their absence. For Rilke the French word itself, *verger*, is a “clear name which hides the spring of antiquity” [nom clair qui cache le printemps antique], because he derives it (mistakenly, though it may well be a conscious error) from *ver*, the Latin for spring. Just as the name conceals an ancient presence, so the orchard itself harbors the “disused gods,” and the poems are likewise porous arrangements which provide just enough structure for “the manifest passage of an infinite tenderness” [le passage manifeste /

62 Rilke (1991), 301.

63 See Böschenstein (2006).

64 Rilke (1997), 222–3.

de la tendresse infinie].⁶⁵ In what are among his last poems, it seems that Rilke is drawn to French in part for its Latinity, for its openness to classical allusion and for its ancient roots, as if, having rested, the gods might return in the lightness and grace of its easy derivation and add themselves, as the German poem “Now it is time” puts it, to “our full life” [“unserm vollen Leben”].⁶⁶ Here too, poetry draws its power from touching an ancient source in the present, but the celebration of existence the poems sketch and conjure is without anxiety, the distinctions between the ancient past and the modern day, between far and near, absence and presence, seem almost without weight. In the orchard poems it is possible to say of the gods that “none of them ever vanishes, / however much abandoned” [aucun jamais ne s’efface, / tant soit-il abandonné].⁶⁷

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65 See, within the collection *Vergers*, the sequence of seven poems entitled “Verger”: SW ii.531–5. The translation is mine.

66 SW ii.185 line 12.

67 SW ii.533.

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George Seferis Reads John Keats

Defending “Greek Hellenism” and the Question of the Renaissance, Language and Locality

Polina Tambakaki

1 Introduction

The poet-diplomat George Seferis [Γιώργος Σεφέρης] (Smyrna, modern Izmir, Turkey 1900–Athens, Greece 1971; Nobel Prize, 1963) is regarded as the Greek high Modernist par excellence, often described as the “Greek Eliot.”¹ Indeed, Eliot’s Modernist poetics, with its claims to impersonality and anti-Romanticism, played a major role in Seferis’s poetic theory and practice. It is thus no surprise that Seferis referred to Romantic poets rarely and, in general, negatively. Even when he extolled Dionysios Solomos [Διονύσιος Σολωμός] (1798–1857), the Romantic poet who is regarded as the founding father of modern Greek poetry, Seferis noted: “It is a remarkable trick of fate that modern Greek poetry began with him, whom we could much more easily imagine a contemporary of Mallarmé than of Byron.”² In this context, it is also no surprise that Seferis’s relationship to Romantic poets has not been investigated so far,³ although Eliot’s affinity with the Romantics has long been acknowledged

1 This chapter combines and expands on two talks on Seferis and Keats given at King’s College London (conference “Sounds of the Hellenic World,” 2016) and the University of Cyprus (Colloquium of Modern Greek Studies, 2016). The following abbreviations are used for works by Seferis: D1–3 = *Dokimes* [Δοκίμεις], 3 vols. (Ikaros, 1974, 1992); M1–9, *Meres* (*Days*) [Μέρες], 9 vols. (Ikaros, 1975–2019); P = *Poems* [Ποιήματα] (Ikaros, 2014). Also: GSA = The George Seferis Archive, Gennadius Library, American School of Classical Studies at Athens; LS = Nikos Yannadakis, *Library of George and Maro Seferis: A Catalogue* [Κατάλογος βιβλιοθήκης Γιώργου και Μαρώς Σεφέρη] (Vikelaia Vivliothiki, 1989); KS = G. K. Katsimbalis and Giorgos Seferis [Γ. Κ. Κατσιμπαλίας & Γιώργος Σεφέρης], “My Dear George” – *Letters* (1924–1970) [“Αγαπητέ μου Γιώργο” – Αλληλογραφία], 2 vols. (Ikaros, 2009); SNL = Seferis Nobel Lecture, available on the official Nobel Prize website; RB = Roderick Beaton, *George Seferis: Waiting for the Angel: A Biography* (Yale University Press, 2003); KSh: *George Seferis: Collected Poems*, trans. by E. Keeley and P. Sherrard (Princeton University Press, 1995). Translations are mine, unless otherwise noted; in the latter case slight changes might have been made.

2 D2.18; Seferis (1982), 174.

3 For example, in Beaton’s indispensable biography of Seferis there is only one fleeting reference to Byron (RB.115); no mention is made of Coleridge, Wordsworth, Blake, Shelley or

in the bibliography,⁴ and despite the fact that in the Second Generation of British Romantics Hellenism played a special role: Lord Byron (1788–1824), and to some extent Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792–1822), were inspired by the Greek Revolution or War of Independence, which started in March 1821 and led to the creation of the Greek nation-state in 1830.⁵ In his Nobel Lecture, entitled “Some Notes on Modern Greek Tradition,” Seferis stressed the focal significance of the “moment when the resurrection of modern Greece beg[an];” it was then that “our people” also left “the gift of poetry” in the hands of Solomos.⁶

This chapter deals with Seferis’s relationship to the English Romantic poet John Keats (1795–1821), who, unlike the Philhellenes Byron and Shelley, “did not live long enough to be inspired by the Greek Revolution, which broke out a few weeks after his death.”⁷ It argues that Keats seems to be the only foreign Romantic poet with whom Seferis felt a strong affinity – at times, as strong as that with Eliot; and that, as in the case of Eliot, Seferis’s relationship to Keats took the form of an exercise of cultural alterity within the European tradition, in which language and locality played a key role. The chapter discusses new material from Seferis’s archive, together with references in his essays and letters, aiming to demonstrate that both Keats’s Englishness⁸ and Hellenism provoked in Seferis an ambivalent reaction.

Seferis never referred directly to Keats’s “Hellenic” poems, such as the “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” “On Seeing the Elgin Marbles,” or “On First Looking into Chapman’s Homer.” But, as we will see, evidence of his attentive reading of Keats’s poems and letters, and of books about Keats, leaves no doubt that Seferis paid attention to Keats’s poems with “Grecian” inspiration. After all, Keats was naturalized, as it were, as a modern Greek in the 1915 poem “Yannis

Keats. Even Solomos is mentioned only four times, mostly in passing. In Kohler’s (1985), despite some apt references to Keats (e.g., on p. 534 about Keats’s “negative capability”), the question of the relationship between Seferis and Keats has not been touched upon.

4 See, for example, the opening of chapter 3 in O’Neill (2007), entitled “Dialectic Ways”: T. S. Eliot and Counter-Romanticism: “The younger T. S. Eliot seems less questioning than assured in his dismissal of Romanticism. An amusing example occurs in a 1918 review when he writes, ‘Because we have never learned to criticize Keats, Shelley, and Wordsworth (poets of assured though modest merit), Keats, Shelley and Wordsworth punish us from their graves with the annual scourge of the Georgian Anthology’ [Eliot (2014), 71]. Yet Eliot’s anti-Romanticism masks a powerful affinity with Romantic poetry; his overt hostility to Romanticism connects with his complex feelings about self-expression in poetry.”

5 See Beaton (2013).

6 SNL.

7 Woodhouse (1969), 88.

8 Everest (2021), 71: “The sensuous Englishness of Keats’s style.”

Keats" by Angelos Sikelianos (1884–1951), to which Seferis alluded in one of his own most famous poems, "The King of Asine."

In this discussion, Keats's "Hellenic" sonnet "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer" will receive special attention, not least because its Homeric theme is combined with the question of the Renaissance and that of the living language. In his essays, Seferis touched upon both questions in relation to modern Greek and European identity. He did the same in his poetry, with the most representative example being the poem "Upon a Line of Foreign Verse," alluding to the famous sonnet "Heureux qui, comme Ulysse, a fait un beau voyage" by Joachim du Bellay (1522–1560). Seferis wrote this poem while living in London, in Hampstead, close to "my neighbor Keats," as he wrote in his letters. During that period he was also discovering Eliot.

The discussion will start with Seferis's last poem "On Aspalathoi ..." [Ἐπὶ ἀσπαλάθων ...] (1971), which will help us set the scene for this investigation, not only as a blueprint of Seferis's poetics and as a representative example of central themes of his poetry, but also because a clear Romantic tone is detected in it that is uncommon in Seferis. A charting of the notion of "Greek Hellenism" and references to Keats in Seferis's essays will follow. Then the chapter will focus on Seferis's poetic dialogue with Keats. Following a chronological order, we will look first at translation and poetic endeavors by Seferis during the inter-war period, namely at his translation of Keats's "La Belle Dame sans Merci" and his two poems "Hampstead" and "Upon a Line of Foreign Verse." Then, attention will turn to Seferis's poem "The King of Asine," dating from the start of the Second World War. The chapter will close with Seferis's collection *Logbook III*, in which the question of Hellenism is posed against the backdrop of the Cypriot struggle against British colonial rule.

2 Romantic Resonances: "On Aspalathoi ..." – Harps, Ruins, the Greek Revolution, and "Words that Have Not Changed"

Bearing the dateline "March 31, 1971," "On Aspalathoi ..." was first published in the Greek newspaper *To Vima* on September 23, 1971, three days after Seferis's death. The poem's French version, by Seferis himself, had already appeared in the French newspaper *Le Monde*. "On Aspalathoi ..." refers to a spring visit to Sounion, the rocky promontory at the tip of Attica, where the ruins of the temple of Poseidon stand. It describes how the view of spiky bushes of aspalathoi (plural of the noun aspalathos) reminded the speaker of the final section of Plato's *Republic*, where Socrates narrates the myth of Er, a *katabasis* to the Underworld (*Republic* 614b–621b). The poem focuses more particularly on

Socrates' description of the fate of Ardiaios, the Pamphylian tyrant who paid for his crimes in the netherworld, by being flayed and dragged on aspalathoi bushes [εἴλικον παρὰ τὴν ὁδὸν ἐκτὸς ἐπ' ἀσπαλάθων κνάμπτοντες] (*Republic* 616a). The poem's message was clear in the historical context of the period. A military junta had been established in Greece since April 21, 1967; and on March 28, 1969 Seferis had made a statement, in Greek, on the BBC World Service: "I see ahead of me," he said, "the precipice toward which the oppression that has shrouded the country is leading us."⁹

Yet Seferis was not a poet of easy messages. On the contrary, his poetry has often been characterized as "difficult." In his essay "Introduction to T. S. Eliot" (1936), accompanying his translation of Eliot's *The Waste Land*, Seferis touched on the "difficult" allusive nature of modern poetry and its relation to the "historical sense." According to Eliot's famous definition given in his essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent," "the historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe *from Homer* and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order" (emphasis added; see also below).¹⁰ Seferis's theory and practice revolved around the question of tradition *from Homer* and its relation to language, evoking Bakhtin's statement: "When a member of a speaking collective comes upon a word, it is not as a neutral word of language [...] uninhabited by others' voices. [...] His own thought finds the word already inhabited."¹¹

The question of language continuity is at the core of Seferis's defense of what he called "Greek Hellenism" in juxtaposition to "European Hellenism." For Eliot the language of Homer, and ancient Greek more generally, is a dead language that has to be learnt "by an artificial method."¹² Others, like Lord Byron, speak of "[how] strikingly similar to the ancient Greek is the modern Romaic [= Greek] as a written language and [how] dissimilar in sound."¹³ Seferis – a

9 D3.261–2; Seferis-Keeley (1997), 228–9. On Seamus Heaney's dialogue with Seferis's poem in "To George Seferis in the Underworld" (Heaney (2006)), see Fowler (2014) and Kruczkowska (2017), 271–84.

10 Eliot (1951), 14 with D1.42–3.

11 Bakhtin (1984), 202.

12 See Eliot (1957), 27 ("The Music of Poetry").

13 Moore (1831), vi.313. For concise treatments of the questions of the pronunciation of Greek and Latin and the relationship between ancient and modern Greek, see Katz (2010) and Mackridge (2010) respectively. On the term "Romeic," see Tambakaki (2019b), 237 with bibliography; see also Delivoria (2016), 70, n. 2: "During this period and up to the mid-nineteenth century, the term 'Greek [ελληνικά]' denoted always 'ancient Greek;' the words used for the modern Greek language were Romeic, Grecian [γραικική], simple, common, natural etc."

member of the speaking collective (in Bakhtin's words) of modern Romaic (in Byron's words) – stressed the familiarity he felt with words *from Homer* or later forms of the language, such as that of the Gospels.

In his 1942 essay "On the Travelers of the 'Sea Adventure,'" written in French during the Second World War for the Cairo journal *La Semaine Égyptienne*, Seferis stated in a polemical tone:

It is difficult to speak of modern Greek literature to foreign people. Foreigners ignore Greece; and they ignore it because they know it partially. [...]

And they ask: "Are you indeed direct offspring of Leonidas or Themistocles?"

– No, we are only offspring of our mother, who spoke to us in Greek, prayed in Greek and felt her soul exulted on Good Friday in front of the procession of the dead God. For those interested in details I suggest looking at Sir James Frazer.¹⁴ And our mother's mother did the same – the poor woman [la pauvre femme], as Villon would say.¹⁵

The reference to the French late-medieval poet François Villon (1431–c.1463) manifests Seferis's intimate familiarity with French literature. Yet the essay "On the Travelers of the 'Sea Adventure'" focused not on French literature but on the relationship of modern Greek writers to English literature. The essay's title referred to the wrecking of the British ship "Sea-Adventure" (or "Sea Venture") on the Bermudas in 1609, during the colonization of the North Americas, and combined a host of literary allusions: from Shakespeare's *The Tempest* (which is thought to have been inspired by the shipwreck), to contemporary British writers such as Lawrence Durrell (1912–1990), who was writing his book *Prospero's Cell*, while serving as a press attaché to the British embassy in Egypt, first in Cairo and then in Alexandria.

Although he singled out the Alexandrian poet C. P. Cavafy (1863–1933), Seferis argued that it was mainly his own generation that was collectively fascinated by the discovery of English literature, especially after 1922. That year the Greco-Turkish War (1919–1922; known in Greece as the Asia Minor Campaign and in Turkey as the War of Independence) ended up with what is known in Greece as the Asia Minor Catastrophe, with one and a half million Greeks of Anatolia arriving in Greece as refugees. For Turkey this victory meant

14 Seferis refers to James George Frazer's *Golden Bough*, which, among other things, influenced Eliot greatly. See also DeYoung, this volume, pp. 66 and 71–2.

15 D3.57. Seferis refers to Villon's 1461 collection *Le Testament*.

its emergence as a sovereign nation-state; for Greece, the end of the “Ionian vision” and a story which “carried us back to classic times [as a] true Greek tragedy,” in Winston Churchill’s words.¹⁶ For Seferis, a native of Smyrna, this was “the event that affected me more than any other.”¹⁷

Seferis’s “historical sense,” his dialogues with Anglophone literature and the way in which he perceived the latter’s dominant role in contemporary European and world literature, were also connected with history in a less imaginative sense. Seferis was a diplomat whose career spanned from 1926 to 1962, bringing him to various places around the world, in a period of turbulent events on domestic and international levels.¹⁸ During his career Britain played a pivotal role in international affairs both as an imperial power and as a power in decline. In addition to periods in Egypt (Cairo and Alexandria) and South Africa (Pretoria) during the Second World War, in which he served with the Greek government-in-exile, Seferis held posts in the Middle East and the Balkans; as for his Western posts, with the exception of a short stint in New York, they were all in London, where Seferis concluded his career as the Greek ambassador to the United Kingdom, having also participated in the negotiations over the postcolonial status of the island of Cyprus.¹⁹

Seferis’s involvement in public affairs and international relations played a role in the way he perceived national identity in relation to state politics. It also left its mark in a polemical tone, which is skillfully elusive in his poetry and bitterly personal in his political prose texts, where he also took pains to stress that he had no political affiliation. In his 1969 BBC statement against the junta Seferis said: “I am a man without any political affiliation, and, I can claim, I speak without fear or passion.”²⁰ It is worth noting that in a letter he sent to Seferis after the BBC statement, the poet Yannis Ritsos (1909–1990), a communist, who during the years of Seferis’s diplomatic career and during the junta had experienced political exile, wrote: “Here is the consolation a true Poet can give to people.”²¹

16 See Llewellyn-Smith (1998), with Churchill’s words as its motto.

17 D2.355.

18 On the interconnection of Seferis’s poetic and diplomatic preoccupations, see the first (2019) systematic treatment of the topic by Vassilis Papadopoulos, whom I also thank for his stimulating remarks and suggestions on an earlier version of this chapter.

19 Seferis’s posts abroad were: Korça, Albania, 1936–1938; Ankara, Turkey, 1947–1951; Beirut, Libanon, 1953–1956; New York 1956–1957. London: 1931–1934, 1951–1952 and 1957–1962. On Cyprus, see also below, p. 282.

20 See above, p. 243.

21 Mg.191.

Written in spring 1971, the poem “On Aspalathoi ...” was an example of what Seferis had said more than twenty years earlier: “I am a monotonous and obstinate man who [...] has not ceased to say the same things over and over again; things that are not even his own.”²² The poem contains key elements of Seferis’s “mythology”²³ and is representative of his Modernist “art of absences” or “art of missing presences” [ελλειπτική τέχνη] and “art of overtones” (or “harmonics”) [τέχνη υπονοουμένων]:²⁴

Ήταν ωραίο το Σούνιο τη μέρα εκείνη του Ευαγγελισμού
 πάλι με την άνοιξη.
 Λιγοστά πράσινα φύλλα γύρω στις σκουριασμένες πέτρες
 το κόκκινο χώμα κι ασπάλαθοι
 δείχνοντας έτοιμα τα μεγάλα τους βελόνια
 και τους κίτρινους ανθούς.
 Απόμακρα οι αρχαίες κολόνες, χορδές μιας άρπας αντηχούν ακόμη ...

Γαλήνη.
 Τι μπορεί να μου θύμιζε τον Αρδιαίο εκείνον;
 Μια λέξη στον Πλάτωνα θαρρώ, χαμένη στου μυαλού τ’ αυλάκια·
 τ’ όνομα του κίτρινου θάμνου
 δεν άλλαξε από εκείνους τους καιρούς.
 Το βράδυ βρήκα την περικοπή:
 “Τον έδεσαν χειροπόδαρα” μας λέει
 [...]

[Sounion was lovely that day of the Annunciation
 again in spring.
 Sparse green leaves around rust-coloured stone,
 red earth, and aspalathoi
 with their huge thorns and their yellow flowers
 already out.
 From afar the ancient columns, strings of a harp, still resonate ...

22 D2.56; also quoted by Anders Österling in his Presentation Speech during the Nobel Award Ceremony (see the official Nobel Prize website).

23 For the use of the term, see D2.354.

24 D1.147. On the musical term “harmonics” in Seferis’s essays, see Tambakaki (2011). Cf. below, p. 255, the use of the term in SNL.

Peace.

– What could have made me think of Ardiaios?
Possibly a word in Plato, lost in the mind's furrows
the name of the yellow bush
hasn't changed since those times.
That evening I found the passage:
"They bound him hand and foot," it says
[...]

lines 1–13

In the poem, the name of the spiky bush "aspalathos" functions as a memory trigger of the speaker's readings and of language's "pastness in the present" (in Eliot's words).²⁵ This botanical word participates in a wide network of inter- and intra-textual relationships, from *Homer* to the British Romantics and Seferis's own poems.

In the *Odyssey* (3.278) the promontory of Sounion is found as "holy Sounion, the cape of Athens" [Σούνιον ἱρὸν [...] ἄκρον Ἀθηνέων]. It also appears in Plato's *Crito*, where Socrates is told that the ship that was expected from the sacred island of Delos has left Sounion (*Crito* 43d). According to the decision taken in his trial in the previous spring, this news signaled the countdown of Socrates's execution, the following day, on the ship's arrival. Socrates (who was also the narrator of the myth of Er in Plato's *Republic*, to which "On Aspalathoi ..." refers) had a special importance for Seferis: he was "the just man" [ο δίκαιος].²⁶ Not surprisingly, the figure of Socrates facing death is detected in a set of two poems from Seferis's collection *Logbook 1* [Ημερολόγιο καταστρώματος Α'], both from the eve of the Second World War: "The Last Day" [Η τελευταία μέρα] ("Feb. '39"), containing further allusions to Homer and the ancient historian Thucydides; and "Spring AD" [Άνοιξη μ.Χ.] ("March '39"). The latter starts with the phrase "Again in spring" – which constitutes the second line of "On Aspalathoi ...". Both poems, "The Last Day" and "Spring AD," allude to a folk song from the Greek Revolution against the Ottoman Empire: "In spring, in summer, slaves ..." [την άνοιξη, το καλοκαίρι, ραγιαδες ...].²⁷ Yet, in "On Aspalathoi ..." the Greek Revolution is also pointed to directly: the Christian feast of the Annunciation [Ευαγγελισμός] (on March 25), which appears in the

25 Eliot (1951), 14.

26 D2.52. Cf. D2.20.

27 For the poems and their datelines, see Tambakaki (2008); see also below, pp. 277–82, for the last poem of the collection, "The King of Asine."

opening line of “On Aspalathoi ...” (and only here in Seferis’s poetry; a *hapax*) is traditionally thought of (and officially celebrated by Greeks) as the day on which the Revolution broke out in 1821.

In Athens, on March 25, 1971, celebrations for the 150th anniversary of the Greek Revolution were organized by the junta with military parades all morning.²⁸ A visit to Sounion on that same day was thus also a way of being in a place where one could feel away from all this and might peacefully contemplate what the very word “Greek” meant, in 1971 and back to 1821. One might bring to mind, for example, that for the diplomat Klemens von Metternich, foreign minister of the Austrian Empire and one of the fervent opponents of the Greek Revolution, “Greek” was an inconvenient term, since “it was used indiscriminately to signify a territory, a race, a language, or even a religion.”²⁹ Again, the question put in the mouth of “The Poet” in Solomos’s essay “Dialogue” (written in 1824) might be evoked: “Have I anything else in my mind but freedom and language?”³⁰

The very compound Greek word for the (religious and national day of the) Annunciation, “Evangelismos,” includes a key word in Seferis’s poetry and poetics: that of “angel”/“angelos” [ἄγγελος].³¹ This is the ancient word for the messenger, which over time came to mean the Christian messenger of God and is also used as a common Greek male given name. It thus relates both to the notion of “speaking/announcing” and the trajectory of a word “in its transfer from one mouth to another, from one context to another context, from one social collective to another, from one generation to another generation,” in Bakhtin’s words³² – or, as Seferis himself wrote in 1962, “those big waves from the depths of time that shift the meaning of words.”³³ In his poetry, angels (many times in combination with images of birds or wings) are connected with the search for the miracle, the themes of love and death or a sense of serenity [galini, γαλήνη]. In “On Aspalathoi ...” this last word, “galini,” makes its most emphatic appearance in Seferis’s poetry as a one word-line, also bringing to mind other poems by Seferis, such as “The Wreck of ‘Thrush’” [Το ναυάγιο της “Κίχλης”]: in it Socrates’ voice is heard emerging from beneath the calm sea (“Calm spread all around” [Μεγάλη απλώνουνταν γαλήνη] (line 11)), as if from

28 See RB.402–3.

29 Quoted in Crawley (1930), 62, n. 44.

30 Solomos (1986), 12.

31 Cf. the title of RB, *Waiting for the Angel*. The influence of Rilke’s angels on Seferis is beyond the scope of this chapter. The relationship of Seferis to Rilke is something which must be examined in detail. On Rilke, see Louth, this volume.

32 Bakhtin (1984), 201.

33 D2.138; Seferis (1993), 14.

the underworld: "And if you condemn me to drink poison, I thank you" ["Κι α με δικάσετε να πιω φαρμάκι, ευχαριστώ"] (line 20).³⁴

In fact, the word "γαλήνη" (translated as "calm," "serenity," or "stillness") is another word *from Homer* linked with the image of the sea, as for example in the *Odyssey* (5.391–2): "the wind ceased and there was a windless calm" [ἄνεμος μὲν ἐπαύσατο ἡδὲ γαλήνη / ἔπλετο νηνεμία]. Yet, unlike in other poems by Seferis, in "On Aspalathoi ..." the sea is not named, nor are the islands viewed from the promontory of Sounion. The closest and most impressive of these islands, eastwards, is Makronisos, an island of "regeneration" of communists during the Greek civil war, which followed the Second World War.³⁵ On Makronisos Ritsos (see above) was exiled in 1949–1951. Given Seferis's dislike for overtly political poetry, this absence of reference to the sea or the surrounding islands might be seen as another example of his "art of missing presences" (see above).

What is certain is that the visual imagery in the first section of "On Aspalathoi ...," prior to the quotation from Plato's *Republic*, is like "the nineteenth-century watercolour of classical lands, standardly tranquil: ancient distant ruin, stone and plant foreground," in the words of Ruth Padel;³⁶ and that the metaphor of a harp used for the ancient columns, which determines the acoustic imagery of the poem, has a clear (and rare for Seferis) Romantic tone: the harp, also as an Aeolian harp or lyre, is a literary *topos* in Romantic poetry.³⁷ In fact both the visual and the acoustic elements of the Sounion setting bring to mind Lord Byron, the epitome of the Romantic Philhellene and poet, who died in Missolonghi in 1824 during the Greek Revolution and whose name is carved on one of the temple's columns, allegedly by Byron himself. In Byron's *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* Sounion appears with the name Colonna: "[...] where Tritonia's airy shrine adorns / Colonna's cliff, and gleams along the wave" (Canto II, 812–13). Byron also mentions Plato's and his disciples' supposed meetings in Sounion, an image which had become well known from *The Travels of Anacharsis the Younger in Greece* [Voyage du jeune Anacharsis en Grèce] by Abbé Jean-Jacques Barthélemy (1716–1795).³⁸ Above all, there is Byron's poem "The Isles of Greece" from *Don Juan*: "Place me on Sunium's

34 In the poem Seferis also used (in modern Greek) the last words from Plato, *Apology* 42a.

35 See Bournazos and Sakellariopoulos (2000).

36 Padel (1987), 86.

37 See, for example, Coleridge's "Effusion xxxv" (1796; later retitled "The Eolian Harp").

38 Barthélemy (1787), 74. See the note on Canto II of *Childe Harold*: "In all Attica, if we except Athens itself and Marathon, there is no scene more interesting than Cape Colonna. To the antiquary and artist, sixteen columns are an inexhaustible source of observation and design; to the philosopher, the supposed scene of some of Plato's conversations will not be unwelcome."

marbled steep, / Where nothing, save the waves and I, / May hear our mutual murmurs sweep" (Canto III, 779–81).

Byron's "Isles of Greece" is perhaps the most famous "Hellenic" poem by any English poet.³⁹ But the line from Seferis's "On Aspalathoi ..." with the columns of the ruined temple resonating like a harp surely evokes other Romantic poets too – such as Keats or "Adonais" in Shelley's "Elegy on the Death of John Keats."⁴⁰ Solomos is another Greek example, with lines such as the following, from the first draft of *The Free Besieged*, about the second siege and capture of Missolonghi by the Turks (1825–1826): "At daybreak I followed / The road of the Sun, / The lyre of justice / Hanging from my shoulder."⁴¹

3 Seferis's Essays: "Greek Hellenism" and "European Hellenism": Ancient Greece, the Renaissance, and the "Chameleon-Poet"

In April 1965 in the Greek journal *Tachydromos* a two-page article was published bearing the long title: "Ingmar Bergman asks 'Why is modern Greece insignificant [ασήμαντη]?' Is it really insignificant? Answers provided by three renowned Swedes and George Seferis."⁴² Both Bergman's question and the four answers had appeared a few weeks previously (in Swedish) in the program of the production of Euripides' *Hippolytus* in the Royal Dramatic Theatre, Stockholm, whose Artistic Director at the time was Ingmar Bergman. Seferis had recently been awarded the Nobel Prize for literature by the Swedish Academy (in 1963) and his answer was politely polemical, expressing views which he had held for decades.⁴³

The question of how the Europeans saw modern Greece and how modern Greeks looked at Europe had played a central role in Seferis's aspirations and anxieties since his student years in Paris (1918–1924), where he studied law against his wish to devote himself solely to poetry. The aftermath of the First World War was crucial for the fate of the Ottoman Empire, and subsequently of Seferis's native Smyrna, which was turned to ashes in September 1922. At the

39 In Rodd ((1910); see also below, p. 259), "The Isles of Greece" is no. 1 in the collection after the introductory lines from Milton's "L'Allegro" (lines 136–50, "Lap me in soft Lydian Aires").

40 On the lyre on Keats's gravestone in Rome (allegedly based on the so-called Elgin lyre in the British Museum), see Franklin (2003), also in relation to Keats's *Endymion*.

41 Trans. by Peter Thompson; Solomos (2000), 13.

42 D3.172–3 and 387.

43 D3.387. In the George Seferis Archive Bergman's question is found in two different forms, a shorter and a longer one: GSA10/1/20.1–2 and 10/2/21.1. I thank Fiona Antonelaki for her help with material from the Seferis Archive and the Seferis Library in Herakleion.

same time, on the world literary scene, ancient Greece continued to be “significant;” suffice it only to think of the awarding of the Nobel Prize to the Swiss poet Carl Spitteler for his epic *Olympian Spring* [Der olympische Frühling] in 1919 or the publication of James Joyce’s *Ulysses* in February 1922 in Paris.

On the centenary of the Greek Revolution, the young Seferis gave his first literary talk, in Paris, on March 18, 1921: he spoke about the Greek-French poet Jean Moréas (Ioannis Papadiamantopoulos), posing, in a passionate and at the same time naive way, the question of tradition. Around the same period, Seferis wrote in his correspondence: “It’s not enough that you write; you have to map out a tradition and base yourself on that.”⁴⁴ After his return to Athens in 1925, he defined the task facing a modern Greek poet as follows: “To shape this language. This is an advantage we have in comparison to other literatures which are old and over-worked [παρά-εργασμένες].”⁴⁵

In 1931 Seferis published his first poetic collection, *Turning Point* (or *Stanza*) [Στροφή], which was followed, in 1932, by *The Cistern* [Η στέρνα] and, in 1935, by *Novel* (or *Mythistorema*) [Μυθιστόρημα]. Critics spoke of a strong influence of French Symbolism, especially Paul Valéry, on the first two collections, and of T. S. Eliot on the third collection. Seferis reacted to these views, indirectly but clearly, in his 1936 essay “Introduction to T. S. Eliot,” by declaring his faith in “the process of assimilating foreign materials” and in “intellectual [or cultural] crossbreeding [πνευματικές επιμειξεις] in the life of nations.”⁴⁶ In all of his essays, the question of “Greekness” – or what he called “Greek Hellenism” [ελληνικός ελληνισμός] – was to be addressed in relation to, and in defense of, such a crossbreeding, although, as Seferis wrote in a later text on Eliot, “it is very difficult to discuss such an obscure process.”⁴⁷

3.1 “*Dialogue on Poetry*” and “*Monologue on Poetry*” (1938–1939)

On the eve of the Second World War a polemical exchange of views between Seferis and the philosopher Konstantinos Tsatsos about aesthetic criteria and modern Greek poetry left a distinguishing mark on the Greek literary scene. In his two essays, “Dialogue on Poetry” [Διάλογος πάνω στην ποίηση] (“August 1938”) and “Monologue on Poetry” [Μονόλογος πάνω στην ποίηση] (“May 1939”),⁴⁸ Seferis defended artistic freedom against Tsatsos’s views, which originated, Seferis argued, in prefixed aesthetic criteria and ideas of “Greekness” that were

44 Quoted in RB.44.

45 M1.8.

46 D1.23 and 19; Seferis (2009), 146.

47 D2.19; Seferis (1982), 176.

48 Followed by a short third essay entitled “The End of a Dialogue” [Το τέλος ενός διαλόγου], D1.160–5.

alien to artistic creativity. It is in the context of this exchange of views that, in "Dialogue on Poetry," Seferis drew a distinction between "Greek Hellenism" and "European Hellenism": "'Greek Hellenism,' permit me the expression, has not yet been created nor has it acquired its tradition."⁴⁹ As examples of "European Hellenism" Seferis mentioned the figure of Ulysses in Dante, Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis*, Racine's *Phèdre* and Hölderlin's *Hyperion*. Despite their "Greek surface" or "crust" [ελληνικός φλοιός], all these examples belong to literatures and traditions other than Greek, Seferis argued.⁵⁰

The question of the Renaissance was central to Seferis's views.⁵¹ "Our forefathers safeguarded the ancient treasures and when Byzantium fell [...] they brought the Greek seed to the West" where "it took roots and brought fruits." There is only one Greek artist of the period, Seferis continued, who was not merely "a vehicle of Hellenism but also a maker": the painter El Greco (1541–1614) from the island of Crete, who worked in Toledo, in Spain.⁵² As usual in his essays, Seferis also referred to a personal experience: years before, he said, at the National Gallery in London, he saw a portrait by El Greco which gave him "a sensational impression of 'Hellenism'" and made him think: "Like Cretan fifteen-syllable lines."⁵³ Seferis did not name the portrait but there is no doubt that he referred to "Saint Peter" – in fact, a painting "after Greco" related to Greco's "The Tears of Saint Peter."⁵⁴ As for the reference to "Cretan fifteen-syllable lines," it pointed directly to poetic works of the so-called Cretan Renaissance, such as the romance *Erotokritos* by Vitsentzos Kornaros, a work contemporary to El Greco's last years, written in Crete (in all probability between 1595 and 1610) in the traditional fifteen-syllable verse.⁵⁵ As we will see, in Seferis's writing both El Greco's portrait (henceforth "Saint Peter") and *Erotokritos* appear time and time again.

Seferis's views about Greek and European Hellenism were based not only on readings of literature but also on studies such as the *Concise History*

49 D1.100–1.

50 D1.479 with D1.100.

51 As in the case of other such labels, that of "Renaissance" should not "be allowed to impose an artificial coherence on the complex and conflicting evidence of cultural history": Kay, Cave and Bowie (2003), 100.

52 D1.99–100.

53 D1.101. Cf. M2.33.

54 We do not know whether Seferis knew that the painting was "after Greco." The painting was acquired in 1916 (Layard Bequest). Dimensions: 20.3 × 15.9 cm. Seferis also provided some technical details ("no more than thirty centimeters;" "I still remember two brushstrokes on the shoulder" (D1.101)). The suggestion that the painting is "St Jerome as Cardinal" (RB.62) is unsubstantiated. The official site of the National Gallery provides useful information. See also below, pp. 270–1.

55 For Renaissance Crete and *Erotokritos*, see Holton (1991a) and Holton (1991b).

of European Literature since the Renaissance [Précis d'histoire littéraire de l'Europe depuis la Renaissance] (1925) by the comparatist Paul Van Tieghem, which is found in Seferis's library with notes.⁵⁶ In modern accounts we read about the Greek tradition in the West: "While the Roman tradition continued throughout the Middle Ages [...] Greek essentially disappeared. [...] When around 1353 Petrarch finally achieved his youthful ambition of obtaining, from the Greek ambassador to Venice, a manuscript of Homer, he had to admit that 'your Homer is dumb to me, or rather I am deaf to him.' A century later, in 1453, the Turks sacked the intellectual centre of the Greek-speaking world, Constantinople, driving out its scholars and their books. They headed west, to Italy, where many of them made a living teaching Greek, publishing Greek texts, and disseminating Greek literature and culture to an avid humanist audience. Byzantium's disaster was the West's good fortune."⁵⁷

In "Monologue on Poetry," Seferis also touched upon antiquities and their seminal role in classical reception. Speaking of the first experience one may have of the ruins of the Acropolis of Athens, he drew a further distinction, between "two totally different emotional motives": on the one hand, the "historical, archaeological," and, on the other, the "aesthetic." The former relates to the intellect: "I travel to the past with my imagination," Seferis wrote about the "historical, archaeological" motive; "I contemplate the vanity of human affairs; I revolt against the blowing up of the Acropolis by Morosini;⁵⁸ I stand full of admiration before the beauty of the life of the ancient Greeks." The "aesthetic" emotional motive, on the other hand, is connected with a sort of epiphanic experience: "it is a sudden presence, intense and exclusive [...] a voice I do not understand but I feel the need to speak like it in order to understand it."⁵⁹ This sharp distinction was fundamental to Seferis and is detectable in almost all of his texts: "The retrospectives and the reconstructions, no matter how useful, become most inhuman," he wrote in 1962, this time speaking of the ancient site of Delphi; "What else do we have from this 'instantaneous present' [παρόν, τούτο τὸ ἀκαριαῖον]?"⁶⁰

The essays "Dialogue" and "Monologue on Poetry" were addressed to a Greek audience. Other essays by Seferis (such as the aforementioned one on Delphi) were first written for an international audience. One of them is the

56 LS.71. On Van Tieghem's definition of "comparative literature," see Bassnett (1993), 23–8.

57 Ford (2011), 182–3. See also Gardini, this volume, p. 332.

58 In 1687 at the orders of the Venetian Captain Francesco Morosini, during the Morean War between Venice and the Ottomans.

59 D1.126–7.

60 After Marcus Aurelius' *Meditations* [Εἰς ἑαυτὸν 3.10] (see also P.90). D2.141; Seferis (1993), 17.

essay “All Full of Gods” [Πάντα πλήρη θεών],⁶¹ which focused on the same distinction between the “historical, archaeological” and the “aesthetic,” and was dated “February 7, 1971,” that is, a few weeks before the poem “On Aspalathoi ...” Starting with a caption of a drink advertisement in an American popular journal (“The more you know about ancient architecture the more you like the Acropolis,” a 1971 advertisement of Balantine’s scotch whisky),⁶² Seferis spoke, in a highly polemical tone, of erudite scholars “who look into a world as if into something dead long ago, an ornate coffin.” He did not miss an opportunity to refer to language again: “Our language can be approached only as the breath of living people; not like the lifeguarding zeal of grammarians.”⁶³

Back in May 1939 and the “Monologue on Poetry,” by using the distinction between the “historical, archaeological” and the “aesthetic,” Seferis also aimed to imply that his disagreement with the philosopher Tsatsos lay in the fact that they had different motives. Interestingly, he closed the “Monologue” by quoting Keats:

A theorist [θεωρητικός] has a personality, and observes and theorizes [θεωρεί] about the personality of other people, including the poet. Yet, the poet has no personality: “he has no Identity;” “has no self;” “he is the most unpoetical of anything in existence;” “the chameleon Poet.” Here another story starts.⁶⁴

Although Seferis does not name him, the phrases in inverted commas are quotations from a famous letter in which Keats wrote: “What shocks the virtuous philosopher, delights the camelion Poet. [...] A Poet is the most unpoetical of anything in existence because he has no Identity.”⁶⁵

As is evident from his diaries and letters, in spring 1939 Seferis was reading Keats’s letters systematically. Sent on a diplomatic mission to Bucharest, in May 1939, he took with him only this book; and in a letter he sent to his wife, Maro, he wrote about Keats’s letters: “I don’t know if I will be able to realize the plans I have told you about.”⁶⁶

61 The title refers to pre-Socratic Thales (D2.345). The essay was the preface to the album *Grecia*, in the series “Grandi Monumenti” of the Publishing House Arnoldo Mondadori; D2.388.

62 D2.388.

63 D2.343.

64 D1.159.

65 Keats (2002), 195. Seferis would return to the “chameleon poet,” in his essay “A Scenario for *Thrush*” (1949), this time by naming Keats and noting: “Keats’s words, which are well worthy of thinking of” (D2.41).

66 Seferis and Seferi i.320 (21 May 1939); also M3.120.

A few loose papers in the Seferis Archive shed light on those plans: Seferis was thinking of translating a selection of Keats's letters and publishing them with the title "Keats's Letters on Poetry," with the addition of a biographical note and an introduction. In one of Seferis's notes, we read: "The idea of such a publication came to me when I first read Eliot on Keats."⁶⁷ As we will see, this must have happened during Seferis's second stay in London, and more particularly around 1933.

3.2 *Nobel Lecture 1963: "Some Notes on Modern Greek Tradition"*

In his Nobel Lecture (given in French, the language he also used as a diplomat), Seferis presented his own narrative of the modern Greek tradition.⁶⁸ He spoke of ancient Greece only at the end of his talk, and, not surprisingly, language *from Homer* received special attention:

I have not spoken to you of the ancients. Perhaps I should add a few words. Since the fifteenth century when Byzantium fell, they have been integrated into what we have come to call in brief European civilization. [...] There are however certain things that have remained inalienable to us. When I read in Homer the simple words *φάος ἡελίοιο* – today I would say *φως του ἡλίου* (the light of the sun) – I experience a familiarity that is akin to a collective soul rather than to an intellectual effort. It is a note, one might say, whose harmonics reach quite far; it feels very different from what a translation can give [...] and the feeling for a language derives from emotions as much as from knowledge [...] we have always lived in the same country and have seen the same mountains slope into the sea.

In his Nobel Lecture Seferis touched once more upon themes of which he had spoken in his essays "Dialogue" and "Monologue on Poetry" back in 1938–1939, at times even using the same wording. He referred again to the scholars who after the fall of Byzantium went to the West "to spread the seeds of what came to be called the Renaissance;" and as an exception he mentioned the island of Crete, where "a poetry and a verse drama in a language splendidly alive" developed towards the sixteenth century, known as the Cretan Renaissance. He concluded: "Considering that [...] towards the middle of the century the great Cretan painter Domenicos Theotocopoulos, who came to be known as

67 GSA29/4/26 and 29/4/27. Seferis also referred to A. C. Bradley's *Oxford Lectures on Poetry*, in which a section is devoted to Keats. See KS, various references to Bradley's essay "Poetry for Poetry's Sake;" and KS1.310: "I am reading Bradley's other volume on Shakespeare. Splendid" (letter dated "June 11, 1933"); see LS.77.

68 D3.149–68; SNL.

El Greco, was born and grew up on that island, the fall of Crete [in 1669] is an even more painful event than the fall of Constantinople [in 1453].” The reason is that “Constantinople had, after all, received a fatal blow from the Crusaders in 1204.” In front of the Nobel audience, the poet – but also the diplomat – Seferis thus spoke, negatively, of the Fourth Western expedition in the name of Christendom, which sacked Constantinople in 1204, and at the same time, positively, of the cultural flourishing on the island of Crete, which came into the possession of the Venetians in the aftermath of that same Fourth Crusade.

Seferis stressed how much the poems of the Cretan Renaissance were revered by Solomos, the poet whom he put at the beginning of modern Greek literature “at the very moment when the resurrection of modern Greece begins.”⁶⁹ Solomos was from the Ionian islands, another part of Greece which after the Fourth Crusade gradually fell under Venetian rule. But unlike Crete, the Ionian Islands, by and large, did not experience Ottoman rule. Solomos was born in 1798 on Venetian Zante and, after having studied in Italy, he lived most of his adult life on Corfu, which since 1814 had been under British rule.⁷⁰ Seferis pointed out Solomos’s decision to write in Greek (and not in Italian), and his devotion to the spoken language against any linguistic pedantry and purism (λογιοτατισμός, a word, Seferis said, which must be understood as a stance equivalent to that of François Rabelais’s “sorbonicoles”). What is important for our discussion is that, as we will see, in his mapping of Greek tradition and cultural crossbreeding, Seferis links Keats with both Eliot and Solomos.

3.3 “Letter to a Foreign Friend” (1948) and “Digressions from the Homeric Hymns” (1968): “Homer’s World” and “Virgil’s World”

“Letter to a Foreign Friend” [Γράμμα σ’ έναν ξένο φίλο], originally entitled “T. S. Eliot in Greece,” was Seferis’s second essay on Eliot (after his 1936 “Introduction to T. S. Eliot”) and his first one for a wide international audience.⁷¹ The essay was published (in an English translation) in a volume for the sixtieth anniversary of Eliot in 1948.⁷² That same year, Eliot was awarded the Nobel

69 SNL. See above, p. 240.

70 The Ionian Islands became part of the Greek state in 1864, and immediately afterwards the first stanzas of Solomos’s *Hymn of Liberty*, set to music by Nikolaos Mantzaros, was established as the Greek national anthem.

71 On his “On the Travelers of the ‘Sea Adventure,’” see above, p. 244.

72 In March and Tambimuttu (1948), 126–35, in a translation by Nanos Valaoritis. In its first publication in the Greek original in 1949, in the journal *Anglo-Hellenic Review*-*Αγγλο-Ελληνική Επιθεώρηση*, the title was “Letter to an English [Friend] on Eliot” [Γράμμα σ’ έναν Άγγλο για τον Έλιοτ].

prize, and a collection of Seferis's poems was published for the first time in English, entitled *"The King of Asine" and Other Poems*.⁷³

In "Letter to a Foreign Friend" Seferis spoke, in an autobiographical tone, of the "spark of emotion" he felt when he first read Eliot's "Marina" from the *Ariel Poems*, with its opening lines: "What seas what shores what grey rocks and what islands / What water lapping the bow / And scent of pine [...]." This happened in London, "shortly before Christmas 1931,"⁷⁴ Seferis said, adding: "For many of us, the bows of boats have a precious place in our childhood stand of sacred images [στο παιδικό μας εικονοστάσι]." Seferis did not miss to connect his reaction to Eliot's "Marina" with two images from his visits to London museums: the statue of the river-god Ilissos from the Elgin Marbles in the British Museum (in 1948 the river Ilissos was still visibly flowing in Athens);⁷⁵ and El Greco's "Saint Peter" in the National Gallery, a portrait to which, as we saw, he had also referred in his 1939 "Monologue on Poetry," saying that it evoked in him "Cretan fifteen-syllable lines." In his 1948 "Letter to a Foreign Friend" he said of the same painting: "an unchecked idea stuck to my mind that [the portrait's] model was a Cretan boatman." The model of the painting bears indeed a black shirt-like garment that resembles traditional Cretan male dress. Interestingly, El Greco's painting is clearly evoked in the figure of Odysseus in Seferis's poem "Upon a Line of Foreign Verse," whose dateline ("Christmas 1931") coincides with the time when Seferis was discovering Eliot. As we will see, in the poem, Odysseus is likened to old Cretan mariners singing the Cretan fifteen-syllable lines of *Erotokritos*.

"Letter to a Foreign Friend" was in fact not only about what Seferis felt to be familiar in Eliot but also about what he felt foreign. Seferis thus expressed his gratitude "to that unknown shopgirl who offered me [*Ariel Poems*] instead of *Ash Wednesday*." "You see," Seferis wrote, "we are a people who [...] like to have even the most abstract notions presented in a familiar form, something which a Christian of the West would call idolatry."⁷⁶ Seferis would return to things he felt foreign in Eliot in his 1968 text "Digressions from the Homeric Hymns" [Ξεστρατίσματα από τους Ομηρικούς Ύμνους], another text written for an international audience (first published in an Italian translation),⁷⁷ where he referred extensively to Virgil. Quoting the opening lines of W. H. Auden's

73 See below, p. 277–82.

74 D2.9–10; Seferis (1982), 166–7.

75 Ilissos was to be channeled underground to its greatest extent later in the twentieth century.

76 D2.14; Seferis (1982), 170.

77 The essay was the preface to F. M. Pontani, *Inni Omerici* (Edizioni dell'Elefante, Rome); D2.388.

poem “Memorial for the City” (1949), “The eyes of the crow and the eye of the camera open / Onto Homer’s world, not ours,” Seferis drew a distinction between “Homer’s world” and “Virgil’s world” – a version of his distinction between “Greek Hellenism” and “European Hellenism” – in which again language played a crucial role.⁷⁸ Seferis focused on a remark made by Eliot about his first reading of the *Iliad* and the *Aeneid* as a schoolboy: although he found Greek language very interesting, Eliot said, “I found myself at ease with Virgil as I was not at ease with Homer.”⁷⁹

For Seferis – who, unlike Eliot, felt at ease with Homer – the mapping of tradition meant the mapping of what makes one feel at home and what makes one feel foreign. The real challenge, Seferis wrote, is “to enjoy the poetry of Eliot [...] with all the capacities one has for such enjoyment and with all the emotions one possesses, even though these feelings do not coincide at all with those of Eliot.”⁸⁰ Seferis clarified that he paraphrased a phrase by Eliot about Shakespeare. The phrase came from the volume *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*, the Charles Eliot Norton Lectures given by Eliot at Harvard in 1932–1933.⁸¹ Evidently Seferis read the volume immediately after it was published in November 1933.⁸² In it, Eliot expressed himself positively about Keats’s poetry: “Keats seems to me [...] a great poet.” But it was Keats’s letters that Eliot praised unconditionally: “The Letters are certainly the most notable and the most important ever written by any English poet.”⁸³

Seferis never wrote his introduction to the Greek edition of Keats’s letters on poetry, in which Eliot would have had pride of place, as he had planned.⁸⁴ But his explicit references to Keats’s “chameleon-poet,” the poet-with-no-identity, suggest that this idea of the poet would have been at the center of his discussion, also in relation to Eliot’s famous phrase: “The progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality.”⁸⁵ In his “Letter to a Foreign Friend” Seferis paid special attention to this phrase by Eliot, at the same time referring to Solomos’s efforts (in Polykas’s words) “to extinguish his personality into the absolute truth.”⁸⁶ As we can assume, such an “escape from

78 D2.245.

79 D2.243–3 with Eliot (1957), 123–4.

80 D2.21; Seferis (1981), 178.

81 See Eliot (1933), 115.

82 LS.83. See also Nakas (2003) on passages from Eliot (1933) referred to by Seferis in his 1936 essay “Introduction to T. S. Eliot.”

83 Eliot (1933), 100. On Eliot on Keats, see also above, p. 241 n. 4.

84 See above, p. 255.

85 Eliot (1951), 17.

86 D2.18; Seferis (1982), 175.

personality”⁸⁷ represented a *sine qua non* for what Seferis called “aesthetic” emotional motive as opposed to the “historical, archaeological” one.

4 London 1924: Seferis’s Translation of Keats’s “La Belle Dame sans Merci” or Exercises in Cultural Crossbreeding

In 1924 Seferis, aged twenty-four, went from Paris to England. The aim of this six-month stay (August 1924–January 1925)⁸⁸ was to improve his English in view of his examination to enter the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on his return to Greece. Seferis was reluctant to leave Paris and wrote to his mother in a tone of despair: “I don’t know more than two or three words of the language at all and this makes it very difficult for me.”⁸⁹ But in England Seferis did not take proper English lessons. He followed instead a self-taught method, centered around literature: “I stayed up late, reading poets I couldn’t understand, or writing.”⁹⁰ It was during this first stay in London that Seferis saw for the first time El Greco’s “Saint Peter” at the National Gallery and the Elgin Marbles (among them the “Ilissos” statue) at the British Museum, to which famous British Romantic “Hellenic” poets, such as Byron and Keats, referred.

In his introduction to the collection of “Hellenic” poems *The Englishman in Greece* (1910), which is found in Seferis’s library,⁹¹ the diplomat and poet Sir Rennell Rodd wrote: “With the exception of Byron the greater English poets have known Greece only in the spirit, though Keats indeed might almost be regarded as one born in exile from his appropriate country, consumed with a perpetual longing for the Latmos and Olympos of his dreams.” In the collection itself, it is Keats, not Byron, who is most represented.⁹²

Five years after the publication of *The Englishman in Greece*, “Yannis Keats” [Γιάννης Κητς] (1915) by Sikelianos was published, the most famous Greek poem on Keats. The poem naturalizes Keats as Greek even from its title, where “John” is translated as “Yannis,” the familiar Greek name for “John.” It opens with an imaginary visit of Keats to Pylos in the Peloponnese, “with Homer as

87 Eliot (1951), 21.

88 First in Hove, outside Brighton, and then in Balham, London.

89 Quoted in RB.59.

90 RB.61; M3.104.

91 LS.85.

92 Rodd (1910), 5. In the volume there are eleven poems or excerpts by Keats and eight by Byron; see also above, p. 250. Rodd’s statement chimes with the phrase attributed to Shelley that Keats “was a Greek”: Sélincourt (1920), xlv; for the Sélincourt edition, see also below, p. 262.

a secret guide,” in the words of Sikelianos himself;⁹³ and it closes with a visit of the speaker to Keats’s tomb in Rome. The poem alludes to famous works by Keats (especially his “Hellenic” ones) and to his death mask, which it conflates with the (so called by Heinrich Schliemann) “mask of Agamemnon,” King of Mycenae (or Argos) and leader of the Achaeans (an early name for the Greeks used by Homer) in the war against the Trojans:

Κι όλο [...] που λόγιαζα
ν’ απίθωνα μπροστά σου
[...]
μια προσωπίδα σαν αυτή που σκέπασε των Αχαιών
το βασιλιά αποκάτου,
ολόχρυση και ολότεχνη, πελεκητή με το σφυρί
στο αχνάρι του θανάτου!

[I thought I lay before you [...]
[...]
A mask [...] like the mask
that covered the face
Of the king of the Achaeans – all gold, all artifice,
Hammered upon Death’s trace.]

lines 64–5, 68–71 (end)⁹⁴

There is no doubt that Seferis knew Sikelianos’s “Yannis Keats.” But his relationship with Sikelianos was far from straightforward. As Seferis wrote in his obituary of Sikelianos in 1951, it was only in 1935, when he read Sikelianos’s poem “Sacred Road” [Ιερά οδός], that he felt a true affinity with Sikelianos’s poetry. Until then Sikelianos’s poems were, for the most part, of no interest to him.⁹⁵

What is certain is that during his first stay in London the young Seferis occupied himself with Keats’s “medieval” poem “La Belle Dame sans Merci” and not with any of Keats’s “Hellenic” poems. Seferis translated the poem into Greek and sent the translation to his friend Giorgos Katsimbalis, dating it “London,

93 From a 1946 lecture by Sikelianos on Keats; quoted in Savidis (1981), 99.

94 Sikelianos (2011), 207–8.

95 D2.98 and D3.16.

October 1924.”⁹⁶ As Avi Sharon remarks, this “may be the first example of [Seferis’s] engagement with English literature.”⁹⁷

Biographical elements and literary affinities must have contributed to Seferis’s early interest in that particular poem by Keats.⁹⁸ I will only mention basic information about Keats that Seferis could have read in John Cousin’s *A Short Biographical Dictionary of English Literature* (1921), a book found in his library.⁹⁹ In Cousin’s words, Keats was “not at all enthusiastic in his profession” as an apothecary surgeon and wished to “give himself to literature” – as he eventually did; his *Endymion* “was savagely attacked;” and in addition to his health condition, Keats was “likewise harassed by narrow means and hopeless love” for Miss Fanny Brawne; but he “was [also] possessed of considerable confidence in his own powers, and his claim to immortality as a poet.” All this must have struck a chord with the young Seferis.

Although Seferis came from an upper-class family, the 1922 Asia Minor Catastrophe and a series of political upheavals in Greece caused significant financial strain to his family. Seferis’s need for securing means to support himself was imperative. His law studies and his subsequent diplomatic profession were felt (at times acutely) as a burden on his poetic vocation. This was often accompanied by a sense of being the outcast: on the one hand, in relation to the European literary tradition, as someone coming from “insignificant” modern Greece (in Ingmar Bergman’s later words);¹⁰⁰ and, on the other hand, within Greece itself in the period immediately after 1922, as a “Turkish seed” [τουρκόσπορος], a derisive word used for the Asia Minor refugees. Furthermore,

96 In her memoirs Ioanna Tsatsou (Tsatsos (1982), 36) mentions that Seferis sent her a translation from Paris in 1919, but this information is not substantiated by archival material. A draft from the Tsatsou Archive with a translation very close to the one Seferis sent to Katsimbalis must be dated from around 1924; KS2.475 and GSA51/1/19, Seferis’s letter to his brother Angelos (dated “October 9, 1924”).

97 Sharon (2004), 50. This is the first (and only so far) study on Seferis and Keats; although it deals exclusively with Seferis’s translation of “La Belle Dame,” it draws important comparisons with Seferis’s relationship to Eliot. Seferis’s translation of “La Belle Dame” differs greatly from the poem’s first Greek translation by the poet Miltiades Malakasis, in the latter’s 1903 volume *Hours* [ὥρες]. Seferis must have known Malakasis’s volume, which also included translations of poems by Jean Moréas, a close friend of Malakasis. On Seferis’s speech on Moréas, see above, p. 251.

98 Cf. what Seferis wrote about the poet Jules Laforgue (1860–1887), whom he discovered when he arrived in Paris in 1918 at the age of the eighteen: “This young man, who died at the age of twenty-eight, was for me a brother ten years senior” (see D2.13). Keats was twenty-five years old when he died in Rome in 1821.

99 Cousin (1921), 219; LS.341.

100 See above, p. 250.

the “absorbing love passion” and “sense of tragedy” that characterized Keats’s personal life, in Sélincourt’s words,¹⁰¹ characterized Seferis’s personal life too during that period.¹⁰²

Keats’s “La Belle Dame sans Merci” presents a “perfect blend of pathos and irony” on the “great central themes of love, death and immortality.”¹⁰³ It was inspired by (and took the title from) a famous poem on courtly love by the French author Alain Chartier (1385–1430), which was translated into English in the mid-fifteenth century. Seferis’s interest in “cultural crossbreeding,” and in late medieval and Renaissance literature, was well established during his student years in Paris. From there Seferis was asking his sister Ioanna to send him books on medieval Greek literature and the Cretan Renaissance, such as *Erotokritos*.¹⁰⁴ And his early interest in Moréas must have played a key role in his familiarity with French medieval and Renaissance literature – for example, with the authors of the Pléiade of the sixteenth century.¹⁰⁵ There was also Valéry. Seferis said: “[Valéry] chiefly taught me that you can be the most modern of your time by keeping to the strictest forms and the most faithful obedience to your predecessors. I imitated him slavishly in that I looked among the Cretan poets for whatever he had sought among the French writers of the seventeenth century.”¹⁰⁶

Seferis’s translation of Keats’s “La Belle Dame sans Merci” in London in 1924 must have been part of his continuing search for “mapping out a tradition and basing himself on that,” as he had written from Paris,¹⁰⁷ paying special attention to medieval and Renaissance literature – this time through his acquaintance with English literature. Suffice it only to mention the names of authors Seferis could have found in Sélincourt’s notes to Keats’s “La Belle Dame”: Geoffrey Chaucer (c.1343–1400), Edmund Spenser (c.1553–1599), William Shakespeare (1564–1616), and William Browne (c.1590–c.1645), alongside the Romantic Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772–1834).¹⁰⁸ Within this context, it is not surprising

101 In his introduction and notes to *The Poems of John Keats*. The volume is found in Seferis’s library, in the 1920 edition, with notes: LS.91.

102 Sélincourt (1920), xix, 527. See RB.31–65.

103 Sperry (1994), 240.

104 D2.293. Sharon (2004), 61.

105 See above about Seferis’s talk on Moréas in 1921. For Moréas’s manifesto of the Roman School [L’École romane] (published in *Le Figaro*, on September 14, 1891) and the advocacy of “the Greco-Latin principle” of the French letters, see McGuinness (2015), 206.

106 KS2.101–2; Sharon (2004), 70; on Seferis and the French seventeenth century, see Dimitrakakis (2014).

107 See above, p. 251.

108 Sélincourt (1920), 526–8.

that in his translation of Keats's poem Seferis employed the vocabulary of *Erotokritos*.¹⁰⁹

Seferis's first two collections, *Turning Point* (1931) and *The Cistern* (1932), bear witness to his poetic dialogues and crossbreeding up to the beginning of the 1930s. The motto to the second part of *Turning Point*, namely the long poem "Love Discourse" [Ερωτικός λόγος] is telling. Seferis quoted from Pindar's *Pythian* 3, from which Valéry had also quoted in the motto to his *Graveyard by the Sea* [Le Cimetière marin] (1922) (both Seferis's and Valéry's mottos are in the original Greek). But while Valéry quoted Pindar's lines 61–2, "Do not, my soul, strive for the life of the immortals / but exhaust the practical means at your disposal," Seferis quoted Pindar's lines 21–3: "There is among mankind a very foolish kind of person / who scorns what is at hand [*epichoria*, ἐπιχώρια] and peers at things far away / chasing the impossible with hopes unfulfilled."¹¹⁰ Unlike Valéry, Seferis did not focus on the distinction between gods and humans, but on that between what is close and familiar and what is distant. At the same time, he used the overtones Pindar's words might have had for a modern Greek reader: for one thing, in modern Greek the word *epichoria* relates first and foremost to locality, meaning "local, indigenous, native."¹¹¹ It was in such a subtly oppositional or contrapuntal way that Seferis defended poetically "Greek Hellenism" against remarks such as those made by Valéry in a conversation with André Gide: "Who pays attention today to the Greeks? I am sure that what we call 'dead languages' will be dissolved in a state of decay." Seferis commented: "Maybe – but Valéry himself did not seem to have ignored these 'dead languages,' in *The Graveyard by the Sea*, for example."¹¹²

The translation of Keats's poem "La Belle Dame sans Merci" is a rare piece of evidence of Seferis's preoccupation with English literature in the period before *The Cistern*, when French literature prevailed in the map of his cultural crossbreeding (*The Cistern* itself is a poem intricately alluding to Valéry's *Graveyard*). But Seferis's third collection *Novel* (1935), a sort of modern *Odyssey* in twenty-four sections, testifies to the new poetic tone Seferis found in his second stay in London, in 1931–1934. Then, more than ever, Keats, alongside Eliot, played a distinct role in his poetic quests.

109 Sharon (2004), 67–70.

110 Trans. by W. H. Race (Loeb). On Valéry, see also James, this volume.

111 And not "ordinary," as is translated in KSh.

112 Valéry's remarks are quoted in Gide's *Journals* ((1996), 560–1) ("9 February 1907"). For Seferis's quotation, see D2.217.

5 London, Hampstead, 1931: Nostalgia, Empire, and Seferis's Dialogues with du Bellay and Keats

Seferis's second stay in London spanned from August 1931 to February 1934. This was the first posting abroad for the young diplomat Seferis: the first time Seferis lived in a foreign country (and more particularly at the center of the British Empire), while being an official representative of his own country. These were the years of the Great Depression; among many other events, the Statute of Westminster 1931 gave legal recognition to the independence of the dominions; Greece declared bankruptcy (May 1932); and Adolf Hitler came to power in Germany (1933). It was during that period that Seferis discovered Eliot and an "expression of despair in a manner more directly human."¹¹³

As we saw, the discovery of Eliot, according to Seferis himself, occurred during the first months of his second stay in London, when he lived in Hampstead, in North London (from October 1931 to July 1932). But, interestingly, among his letters from this period we also find references to the Romantic Keats, such as: "I have seen many times the death of the hand that writes – *this living hand*, as my neighbor Keats says."¹¹⁴ The house in which Seferis rented a two-room flat was one mile away from Keats House, which opened to the public just a few years before Seferis's second arrival in London.¹¹⁵ Hampstead was a place connected with Keats's love for Fanny Brawne; and there Keats wrote some of his most well-known poems, among them, "La Belle Dame sans Merci."

Seferis's reference to his "neighbor" Keats, together with his knowledge of Keats's minor poems (like the fragment "This Living Hand") suggest that after his translation of "La Belle Dame" during his first stay in London in 1924, his interest in Keats's poetry continued – or at least was rekindled in parallel to his discovery of Eliot, during the months of 1931–1932 in which he lived in Hampstead "carrying with him a great nostalgia."¹¹⁶

¹¹³ D1.30; Seferis (2009), 152.

¹¹⁴ M2.54; cf. also KS2.304.

¹¹⁵ Seferis lived at 8 Antrim Grove, NW3; Keats House was opened in 1925; a new building-addition to the house was opened in July 1931.

¹¹⁶ D2.9; Seferis (1982), 166. In Seferis's library, in the copy of Murry's *Keats and Shakespeare* there is a note by Seferis next to the fragment "This Living Hand" (Murry (1926), 219) with a cross-reference to the relevant page on which the fragment is found in the Sélincourt edition (Sélincourt (1920), 254).

5.1 Seferis's "Hampstead" and Keats's "To Autumn"

A poem written by Seferis during that period is entitled precisely "Hampstead" and expresses the speaker's sense of crippling disconnection from the surrounding landscape and a strong longing for *epichoria* (see above about Pindar):¹¹⁷

Σαν ένα πουλί με σπασμένη φτερούγα
 [...]
 πέφτει το βράδυ.
 Πάνω στο πράσινο χορτάρι
 είχαν χορέψει όλη τη μέρα τρεις χιλιάδες αγγέλοι
 γυμνοί σαν ατσάλι
 [...]
 μαζέψαν τα φτερά τους και γενήκαν
 ένα σκυλί
 [...]
 [που] γυρεύει τον αφέντη του
 ή τη δευτέρα παρουσία
 ή ένα κόκκαλο.
 [...]
 Τώρα γυρεύω λίγη ησυχία
 θα μου 'φτανε μια καλύβα σ' ένα λόφο
 ή σε μια ακρογιαλιά
 [...]
 τα κοπάδια θ' αντιλαλούσαν κατεβαίνοντας στο μαντρί τους
 σα μια πολύ απλή κι ευτυχισμένη σκέψη

[Like a bird with broken wing
 [...]
 the evening falls.
 On the green grass
 three thousand angels had danced the day long
 naked as steel
 [...]
 gathered in their wings, [they] became

117 The title "Hampstead" appeared when the poem was included in the collection *Book of Exercises*, which was published in 1940 in tandem with the collection *Logbook I* (on which see below, pp. 278–9). When it was first published, in 1935, the poem bore the title "Like a Bird ..." [Σαν ένα πουλί ...], after its first line.

a dog
 [...]
 [that] searches for its master
 or the Second Coming
 or a bone.
 Now I long for a little quiet
 all I want is a hut on a hill
 or near a seashore
 [...]
 the flocks would echo descending to their fold
 like some quite simple happy thought]

lines 1, 5–10, 19–24, 31–3

Seferis expressed a similar sense of nostalgia in a letter he sent from London in November 1932, in which his involvement with Keats is clearly attested:¹¹⁸

Today I happened to be in one of those big English parks which are more like forests. It's autumn, and there is little, minimal sun, a vast honey color [ένα απέραντο χρώμα του μελιού], as in Keats's poem "Seasons of mists." *I knew* it was a miracle, my thought recognized it, but beyond that there was nothing to affirm it. *The man* was standing there but he was unable to taste this true miracle [ο άνθρωπος ήταν εκεί που ήταν αλλά δεν μπορούσε να γευτεί αυτό το πραγματικό θαύμα] [...] A single pine needle, or the cypresses of Lykovrissi [in Attica], could give me some serenity [γαλήνη]. (emphasis in the original)

Seferis refers here to Keats's poem "To Autumn," which starts with the lines "Seasons of mists and mellow fruitfulness / close bosom-friend of the maturing sun" (lines 1–2). In the poem thatched cottages also appear (lines 4–5), "full-grown lambs loud bleat from hilly bourn / [...] / and gathering swallows twitter in the skies" (lines 30 and 33 (end)).

The phrase "a vast honey color" and the verb "taste" in Seferis's letter are worth commenting on. "Honey" is a sort of hallmark of Keats's poetry in general, found, for example, in phrases such as "Honey wild and manna dew" in "La Belle Dame sans Merci." As has been argued, "honey" was "for Keats a

118 KS1.287; the letter ("November 4, 1932") was written four months after Seferis left Hampstead. In his poem "Hampstead" critics have pinpointed allusions to Sikelianos's poem "Thalero" [Θαλερό] (1915); Vayenas (1979), 198–200 and Maronitis (2007), 93–114; for Sikelianos's affinities with Keats, see above, pp. 259–60.

figure for poetic language.”¹¹⁹ The actual word does not appear in “To Autumn,” but a honey quality and color prevail in the poem’s imagery – for example, in the overflowing “clammy cells” of bees (lines 9–11) or the ripe swollen gourd (line 7). Seferis’s phrase “a vast honey color,” combined with the verb “taste,” captures this quality, at the same time pointing to the acoustic similarity between the word “mellow” in the first line of Keats’s poem and the Greek word for “honey”: “meli”/“meliou.” It thus encapsulates a complex feeling of both affinity and foreignness. The homesickness of the Greek poet was deeply felt through his inability to experience (or “taste”) what he did recognize as a “true miracle” of English nature and language, expressed in Keats’s poem.

5.2 *Seferis’s “Upon a Line of Foreign Verse” and Keats’s “On First Looking into Chapman’s Homer,” El Greco’s “Saint Peter” and Holbein’s “The Ambassadors”*

Seferis’s letters from London attesting to his reading of his “neighbor” Keats are important not only in relation to his poem “Hampstead” but also to another London poem expressing homesickness: “Upon a Line of Foreign Verse,” in which the Homeric hero Odysseus appears. In fact, the search for serenity by the exile speaker in both poems is so similar that “Upon a Line of Foreign Verse” is arguably an Odyssean (or Homeric) counterpart of “Hampstead.” The Homeric Odysseus’ longing for his native island of Ithaca and his return there after twenty years of absence (owing to the ten-year Trojan War, as described in the *Iliad*, and his ten-year peregrinations after it, as described in the *Odyssey*) have made him a symbol of nostalgia – a word that etymologically is formed by the two ancient Greek words for return (nostos) [νόστος] and pain (algos) [ἄλγος].

“Upon a Line of Foreign Verse” bears the dateline “Christmas 1931.” As we saw, Seferis placed his reading of Eliot’s “Marina” exactly in these days (“shortly before Christmas 1931”), connecting it with his visits to the National Gallery to see the small portrait “Saint Peter” by El Greco, the Greek artist of the Spanish Renaissance.¹²⁰ In those same days, Seferis was also reading the Spanish mystic Saint John of the Cross (1542–1591), asking himself about El Greco, who arrived in Toledo almost fifteen years before the saint’s death: “Why did [El Greco] not manage to stay in Italy? How did he find such a strong affinity with important Spanish [artists and intellectuals] of his time? Why was it Spain that gave him the opportunity to develop his art?”¹²¹

119 Kelley (2007), 77.

120 See above, p. 252.

121 M2.32–3 with D2.23; RB.108.

“Upon a Line of Foreign Verse” encapsulates Seferis’s preoccupation with the Renaissance, and in it the distinction between “Greek” and “European” Hellenism (which Seferis later drew in his essays and in his Nobel Lecture, as we saw above) was thrown into relief for the first time in his writing. The poem is a gloss on the opening line of the famous “foreign verse” “Heureux qui, comme Ulysse, a fait un beau voyage” [Happy is he who, like Ulysses, has made a fine journey] by du Bellay, one of the leading members of the key group of the French Renaissance, the Pléiade.¹²² In the poem – a sonnet – du Bellay expressed the homesickness he felt for his native Anjou, when, in 1553, he found himself in Rome, accompanying his cousin Jean du Bellay, a cardinal and diplomat. Du Bellay’s sonnet thus reflects the longing felt for *epichoria* by a French poet involved in major “routes and nodes” of Renaissance Europe.¹²³ If these routes led du Bellay to Rome, “it was the existence of a Venetian empire that led El Greco to pass through Venice on what turned out to be his way from Crete to Toledo.”¹²⁴ Arguably, “Upon a Line of Foreign Verse” contains codified information about the aspirations and anxieties of Seferis himself, who had just started his peregrinations as a Greek poet-diplomat in the major “routes and nodes” of the twentieth-century world.

Like Ulysses in du Bellay’s sonnet, in Seferis’s “Upon a Line of Foreign Verse” Odysseus makes his appearance at the start of the poem.¹²⁵ But apart from it, everything is different in Seferis’s poem. If, for example, in du Bellay’s poem Ulysses only appears in the simile of the opening line, in Seferis’s poem Odysseus (or more precisely, his shade) remains the dominant figure until the last line, offering serenity to the homesick speaker:

Ευτυχισμένος που έκανε το ταξίδι του Οδυσσέα.
 [...]
 κάθομαι κάποτε τριγυρισμένος από την ξενιτιά [...]
 Και παρουσιάζεται μπροστά μου, πάλι και πάλι, το φάντασμα του Οδυσσέα
 [...]
 Μιλά ... Βλέπω ακόμη τα χέρια του που ξέραν να δοκιμάσουν αν ήταν καλά
 σκαλισμένη στην πλώρη η γοργόνα
 να μου χαρίζουν την ακύμαντη γαλάζια θάλασσα μέσα στην καρδιά του
 χειμώνα.

122 For Homer in the French Renaissance, see Ford (2006), with bibliography.

123 Burke (2007), 200, in the section “Routes and Nodes.”

124 Burke (2007), 200.

125 On Seferis’s Homeric allusions and references before 1931, see Ricks (1989), 119–24 and Tambakaki (2013).

[Happy is he who has made the journey of Odysseus. [...]
 [...]
 I sit sometimes, surrounded by an alien land [...]
 And again and again, the shade of Odysseus appears before me [...]
 [...]
 He speaks ... I still see his hands, that knew how to test if the mermaid on
 the prow was well-carven, without splinter,
 giving me the unruffled blue sea in the heart of winter.]
 lines 1, 6–7, 23–4 (end)¹²⁶

There is no doubt that in Seferis's poem Odysseus is much more than an apt simile. His appearance is made in an epiphanic manner which brings "Upon a Line of Foreign Verse" closer to another sonnet, this time from the beginning of the nineteenth century, which refers to Homer and/in the Renaissance, and in which language and traveling are central themes: the famous sonnet "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer" (1816) by John Keats, Seferis's "neighbor" in Hampstead.¹²⁷ During that period Seferis was reading not only Keats's poems, but also Murry's study *Keats and Shakespeare*, which Murry started as a contemplation about "the history of the human soul since the Renaissance."¹²⁸

In Keats's poem the epiphanic mode takes the form of a series of revelatory discoveries, in which the voice of the Elizabethan author George Chapman (1559–1634), the first translator of the complete *Iliad* and *Odyssey* into English (in 1616), plays the primary role:

Much have I travelled in the realms of gold
 [...]
 Oft of one wide expanse had I been told
 That deep-browed Homer ruled as his demesne;
 Yet did I never breathe its pure serene
 Till I heard Chapman speak out loud and bold:
 Then felt I like some watcher of the skies
 When a new planet swims into his ken;
 Or like stout Cortez when with eagle eyes
 He star'd at the Pacific – and all his men
 Look'd at each other with a wild surmise –
 Silent, upon a peak in Darien.
 lines 1, 5–14 (end)

¹²⁶ Seferis (2006).

¹²⁷ Keats wrote the poem before he moved to Hampstead in 1817.

¹²⁸ Murry (1926), 1; on Seferis reading Murry's book, see above, p. 264 n. 116.

In Keats's poem, the speaker's encounter with Chapman's voice (heard "loud and bold;" line 8) is presented as a revelatory moment, which transformed the knowledge, images and ideas the speaker had held about Homer up to that moment into something alive, which the speaker was able to "breathe" for the first time ("Yet did I never breathe its pure serene / Till I heard Chapman;" lines 7–8). This momentous experience is expressed through a double simile relating to two revelatory sights, one celestial and one terrestrial: on the one hand, there is a view of the heavens by an (anonymous) astronomer, who sees a new planet for the first time (lines 9–10); and, on the other hand, a breathtaking first view of the Pacific Ocean by the Spanish conquistador Hernán Cortés (1485–1547) and his companions (lines 11–14).¹²⁹ This latter view in particular dominates the imagery of the poem, with four lines (out of the fourteen of the sonnet) being dedicated to it. In the Homeric context of the poem, Cortés seems to stand as an embodiment of Homeric figures, either gods on Mount Olympus or victorious heroes in the Trojan War such as Agamemnon.¹³⁰ At the same time, Cortés together with Chapman – the two eponymous historical figures in the poem – represent two of the major powers of the Renaissance, the British and the Spanish Empires.

Exactly around the period in which he wrote "Upon a Line of Foreign Verse," another iconic representation of the Renaissance world must have attracted Seferis's attention: the painting "The Ambassadors" (1533) by Hans Holbein the Younger, at the National Gallery in London.¹³¹ Unlike El Greco's small-scale (and minor) portrait "Saint Peter," "The Ambassadors" was one of the most famous and impressive paintings of the National Gallery and had a diplomatic theme relating to Europe in a period of special interest to Seferis, that following

129 In criticism, among the sources of the poem have been included Robertson's *History of America* and Bonnycastle's *Introduction to Astronomy*; see also below, p. 276 n. 152.

130 Cf. from the BBC documentary *The History of the Conquistadors* by Michael Wood: "Bernal Diaz, who marched with Cortés, was moved to compare the tragedy of Mexico with the Fall of Troy": http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/tudors/conquistadors_01.shtml. Also Mandelstam (1997), 24–5 ["Conversation about Dante"]: "That is why the speech of Odysseus [in Dante] [...] may be applied to the war of the Greeks and the Persians as well as to the discovery of America by Columbus, the bold experiments of Paracelsus, and the world empire of Charles V;" for Seferis and Dante's Odysseus, see below.

131 On the importance of "The Ambassadors," see Brotton (2006), 1–8; Greenblatt (1980), 17–27. Dimensions: 207 × 209.5 cm. For El Greco's "Saint Peter," see above, p. 252 n. 54. In a prose-poem he wrote in Hampstead entitled "Man" [ἄνθρωπος] (dateline "London, June 5, 1932"), Seferis alluded to another famous Renaissance painting "The Raising of Lazarus" (dated 1517–1519) by Sebastiano del Piombo, also at the National Gallery. In Seferis's prose-poem the word "Renaissance" appears for the first and only time in his poetry.

the fall of Byzantium in 1453. In a way reminiscent of Keats's sonnet, among the various objects in Holbein's painting (all laden with symbolic meaning) are two globes, one celestial and one terrestrial, symbols of the voracious search for, and acquisition of, knowledge, wealth, power, and, of course, lands.

The painting depicts two Frenchmen in the court of the King of England Henry VIII (1491–1547; reigned 1509–1547): Georges de Selve, bishop of Lavaur, and Jean de Dinteville, ambassador of the French King Francis I (1494–1547; reigned 1515–1547). A few years after the creation of the painting, in the seminal “manifesto” of the Pléiade *The Defense and Enrichment of the French Language* [La Deffense et illustration de la langue françoise] (1549), one reads about King Francis I: “France owes to him no less than Rome to Augustus.”¹³² The author of the *Defense* was none other than the author of the “foreign verse” of Seferis's poem “Upon a Line of Foreign Verse”: Joachim du Bellay. Concerning England, “The Ambassadors” relates to a period just prior to the flourishing of English translations of Greek texts – a seminal one being exactly Chapman's translation of Homer, the theme of Keats's sonnet “On First Looking into Chapman's Homer.” As Seferis would take pains to note in his 1951 essay “A Greek in England of 1545” [Ἕνας Ἑλλήνας στην Αγγλία του 1545], “the first Greek book was printed [in England] in 1543.”¹³³

Housing impressive paintings such as Holbein's “The Ambassadors,” together with minor and small-scale paintings, such as El Greco's “Saint Peter,” the Renaissance section of the National Gallery in London undeniably played a crucial role in Seferis's efforts to “map out a tradition and base himself on that”¹³⁴ during the period he wrote “Upon a Line of Foreign Verse.” Arguably, the contrast between El Greco's “Saint Peter” and Holbein's “The Ambassadors” is akin to the contrast between the figure of Odysseus in Seferis's “Upon a Line of Foreign Verse” and the figure of Cortés in Keats's sonnet “On First Looking into Chapman's Homer.”

Both figures, the Seferian Odysseus and the Keatsian Cortés are “tall,” “great” or “stout.” But while Cortés stands as a victorious conqueror, surrounded by his men in a spectacular silent panorama, Odysseus appears time and again in the form of a shade, lonely, humble, almost tender, offering the speaker serenity by means of his hardly audible voice:

132 Du Bellay (2006), 350.

133 D2.108, on Nikandros Noukios of Corfu; see Muir (2022). On *D. Joannis Chrysostomi homiliae duae* (London 1543) with woodcuts from Holbein's English period, see Dodgson (1938–1939), 6.

134 See above, p. 251.

Στέκεται μεγάλος, ψιθυρίζοντας [...]
 [...] μιλά ταπεινά και με γαλήνη, χωρίς προσπάθεια, λες με γνωρίζει σαν
 πατέρα
 είτε σαν κάτι γέρους θαλασσινούς, που [...]
 [...] μου λέγανε, στα παιδικά μου χρόνια, το τραγούδι του Ερωτόκριτου, με τα
 δάκρυα στα μάτια
 [...]
 Μου λέει [...]
 Την πίκρα να βλέπεις τους συντρόφους σου καταποντισμένους μέσα στα στοι-
 χεία, σκορπισμένους: έναν-έναν.

[There he stands, tall, whispering [...]
 [...]
 [...] he speaks humbly and serenely, without effort [...]
 [...] like the old mariners, who [...]
 would sing to me in my childhood the song of Erotokritos, with their eyes
 full of tears
 [...]
 He tells me [...]
 [...]
 The bitterness of seeing your companions sunk into the elements, scat-
 tered, one by one.]
 lines 9, 15–17, 19, 21

The speaker's reference to the mariners of his childhood can easily be seen as autobiographical. As Seferis wrote in an essay-testimony, the mariners and villagers of the sea-village of Skala tou Vourla (modern Urla) near Smyrna – where he spent his childhood summers and the place he called “homeland in the most rooted sense of the word [...] where my childhood was rooted and burgeoned”¹³⁵ – were “my own people” [δικοί μου άνθρωποι].¹³⁶ Yet in addition to the loss of Seferis's birthplace in the Asia Minor Catastrophe in 1922, there is a wider nexus of allusions around this reference – for one thing, Smyrna has often been viewed as the birthplace of Homer. Pierre de Ronsard (1524–1585), for example, another leading member of the Pléiade (together with du Bellay), praised “the grand noise of the singer from Smyrna” [[le] [...] haut bruit du chantre Smyrnean], that is Homer, as the model of his (unfinished) epic

135 D3.17.

136 D3.17.

Franciade.¹³⁷ In juxtaposition to this glorious image, Seferis depicts the shade of Odysseus like the figure in El Greco's portrait in the National Gallery: a mariner like Saint Peter, the fisherman disciple of Christ, with his eyes full of tears, singing the fifteen-syllable lines of *Erotokritos* (that is, the prime poetic example of the Cretan Renaissance) to a child native of Smyrna.¹³⁸

Seferis wrote in his 1966 essay on Dante: "In the Western tradition, Odysseus/Ulysses is the canny accomplice in the destruction of Troy, the mother of Rome; he is the man of the Trojan Horse" [*Doureios Ippos*, Δούρειος Ἴππος].¹³⁹ In contrast to this image, in Seferis's "Upon a Line of Foreign Verse" the Trojan Horse acquires an existential dimension, evoking the wooden horse as a children toy – after all the ancient Greek epithet *doureios* [δούρειος] meant wooden:

ο μεγάλος Οδυσσεάς· εκείνος που είπε να γίνει το ξύλινο άλογο και οι Αχαιοί
κερδίσανε την Τροία.
Φαντάζομαι πως έρχεται να μ' αρμηνέψει πώς να φτιάξω κι εγώ ένα ξύλινο
άλογο για να κερδίσω τη δική μου Τροία

[He is the great Odysseus, the one who directed them to build the wooden
horse, and the Achaeans won Troy;
I imagine he is coming to tell me how to build a wooden horse so I may
win my own Troy]
lines 13–14

In the same essay on Dante, Seferis also stressed that in the *Inferno* Ulysses related how the arrival in his homeland had not defeated his yearning [l'ardore] "to gain experience of the world" [divenir del mondo esperto] (*Inferno* 26.97–8); he thus set out again on the open sea with a few loyal companions, destined "to pursue virtue and knowledge" [per seguir virtute e canoscenza] (*Inferno* 26.98 and 120).¹⁴⁰ Interestingly, the Greek word for "virtue," *arete* (αρετή, another word from *Homer*), makes its only appearance in Seferis's poetry in "Upon a Line of Foreign Verse." But in contrast to the Dantean "virtue," in Seferis's poem *Arete* (with a capital A) is the name of the heroine of the love story of *Erotokritos*, whom the speaker was seeing in his childhood dreams: "and in my

137 See Usher (2014), 128. On du Bellay's Homeric Odysseus in relation to Ovid's *Epistulae ex Ponto* and Seferis's "Upon a Line of Foreign Verse," see Paschalis (2021).

138 See above, p. 252.

139 D2.267.

140 With D2.269.

sleep, still thinking of the unjust fate of Arete descending the marble staircase, I was seized with fears” [τότες που τρώμαζα μέσα στον ύπνο μου ακούγοντας την αντίδικη μοίρα της Αρετής να κατεβαίνει τα μαρμαρένια σκαλοπάτια] (line 18). As for Odysseus himself, he only yearns for his home:

[...] με μάτια κοκκινισμένα από του κυμάτου την αρμύρα
κι από το μεστωμένο πόθο να ξαναδεί τον καπνό που βγαίνει από τη ζεστασιά
του σπιτιού του και το σκυλί του που γέρασε προσμένοντας στη θύρα.

[...] with eyes red from the brine of the waves, and from a ripe yearning
to see once more
the smoke wafting from the warmth of his house, and the dog grown old
waiting at the door.]
line 7–8

This nostalgia certainly evokes du Bellay’s “Heureux qui, comme Ulysse” and not Keats’s “On First Looking into Chapman’s Homer.” But both du Bellay’s and Keats’s sonnets share a common “grand” or “heroic” Homeric world, which was different from Seferis’s “Greek” one. The question of language *from Homer* (in Eliot’s words)¹⁴¹ was crucial to Seferis’s juxtaposition of these two worlds, but also to his intimate relationship to Keats.

Seferis’s emphasis on the Cretan Renaissance romance *Erotokritos* and its continuing popularity up to his childhood was consistent with his admiration for the Romantic poet Solomos, who in his essay “Dialogue” fervently supported “the language of the people” against the advocates either of an archaic form of language or of the linguistic “middle way” promoted by the Enlightenment figure and classical scholar Adamantios Korais (1748–1833).¹⁴² Unlike Solomos, who was an admirer of *Erotokritos*, Korais was extremely sceptical about this “Homer of the vulgar [Greek] literature” [“Ὅμηρος τῆς χυδαῖκῆς φιλολογίας”].¹⁴³ Seferis was well aware of the way in which the question of the “living language” was posed in other literatures, and certainly in du Bellay’s 1549 *Defense and Enrichment of the French Language* (see above) – a text which has been characterized in the modern theory of World Literature as “the critical moment in the early accumulation of literary capital” in Europe and thus the “point of departure for a history of world literature.”¹⁴⁴

141 See above, p. 243.

142 See Mackridge (2009), 154–7.

143 See Katsigiannis (2015), 370, with D1.276, and Delivoria (2016), 77–9.

144 Casanova (2004), 46: “du Bellay’s work marked the first time that a national literature had been founded in complex relation to another nation and, through it, another language, one that moreover was dominant and apparently indomitable, namely Latin.”

Du Bellay argued for the use in poetry of “our vulgar [French] tongue” [nos-tre vulgaire] instead of Latin,¹⁴⁵ as a means of revitalization of French poetry as a national literature.¹⁴⁶ Ten years before his *Defense*, with the Edict of Villers-Cotterêts, in 1539, Francis I (see above) decreed that French (Francien) should replace Latin as the language of matters of state. In this context, the references to, and use of, ancient “dead” languages – and especially the Greek language – by du Bellay and other members of the Pléiade functioned as a proof of both their erudition and the rising imperial status of France. One of the most eloquent (and at the same time highly controversial) examples is the way in which the *Defense* opened with an endorsement by the Humanist Jean Dorat (1508–1588). Under his “Greek” name Ἰωάννης Δωρατός, Dorat praised du Bellay’s linguistic patriotism in Greek Homeric hexameters, in a poem-gloss on a famous phrase of the *Iliad* (12.243). Dorat’s “Homeric” lines read as follows:

Εἷς οἰωνὸς ἄριστος ἀμύνεσθαι περὶ πάτρης,
 Εἶπεν ὁμηρεΐῳ εὐεπίῃ χαρίτων.
 “Ἐν δὲ κλέος μέγ’ ἄριστον ἀμύνεσθαι περὶ γλώττης
 Τῆς πατρίδος, καὶ γὰρ φημι παρωδιάων.
 [...]

[“There is no better omen than to fight for one’s country,” said the sweet eloquence of the Homeric Muse. But in echoing the poet I affirm, “There is no greater glory than to fight for the language of one’s country [...].”]

lines 1–4¹⁴⁷

Odysseus’ voice in Seferis’s poem “Upon a Line of Foreign Verse” could not have been more alien to such a Homeric language. The words uttered by Odysseus were “words of our tongue, as it was spoken three thousand years ago” [λόγια της γλώσσας μας, όπως τη μιλούσαν πριν τρεις χιλιάδες χρόνια] (line 9). The possessive “our” does not refer to something acquired through an intellectual effort (as Seferis would say in his Nobel Lecture; see above), but to a sense of living continuity that enables the speaker to feel a strong emotional reaction, similar to the one he felt as a child when he was listening to the old mariners singing “the song of Erotokritos, with their eyes full of tears.” In fact, the image of tearful mariners in Seferis’s poem conjures up Odysseus in his first appearance in the *Odyssey*, sitting on the shore shedding tears of nostalgia (*Od.* 5.151–2, 158): οὐδέ ποτ’ ὄσσε / δακρυόφιν τέρσοντο [...] νόστον ὀδυρομένῳ [...] δάκρυσι [...]

145 Du Bellay (2006), 324–5.

146 On du Bellay’s *Defense*, see Melehy (2017).

147 Du Bellay (2006), 320–1.

δάχρυα λείβων. On a linguistic level, the relationship between the phrases in the *Odyssey* and in Seferis's "Upon a Line of Foreign Verse" ("με τα δάχρυα στα μάτια") is similar to the relationship between the Homeric phrase for "the light of the sun" and its modern Greek equivalent, of which Seferis spoke in his Nobel Lecture.¹⁴⁸ Here again the question is about the effect of "words that have not changed," as posed in Seferis's last poem "On Aspalathoi ..." ¹⁴⁹

However, Odysseus' voice in "Upon a Line of Foreign Verse" is hardly audible: what the speaker hears is Odysseus' whisper. The familiarity he felt for Odysseus' Homeric language is rather reminiscent of what Seferis wrote in 1939 in his essay "Monologue on Poetry" about the "aesthetic" experience of the ruins of the Acropolis: it is the experience of a "sudden presence, intense and exclusive" like "a voice I do not understand but I feel the need to speak like it in order to understand it."¹⁵⁰ Arguably, according to Seferis's distinction between the "aesthetic" and the "historical, archaeological" experiences, the figure of Ulysses in du Bellay's "Heureux qui, comme Ulysse" relates to the latter, while Keats's "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer" to the former.

Even if Seferis drew this distinction for the first time in his essays in 1939, it is difficult to think that he had not recognized it as lying at the heart of "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer" by the Romantic poet whose idea of the "chameleon-poet" Seferis mentioned in the closure of the "Monologue on Poetry" as corroborating his views, as we saw. The vicious attacks on Keats as a "Cockney poet" stressed exactly his inability to show the proper familiarity with and erudition about the Homeric original.¹⁵¹ Yet Keats's sonnet speaks exactly of a deeply felt passage from an "archaeological" to an "aesthetic" experience, in Seferis's terminology. Before the reading of Chapman's translation the speaker was traveling to the past with his intellect ("Much have I travelled in the realms of gold"), admiring an exotic world which was conventionally linked to a bard called Homer ("Oft of one wide expanse had I been told / That deep-browed Homer ruled as his demesne"). The reading of Chapman's translation was a totally different experience, a rapture: the double simile combining the "watcher of the skies" and "stout Cortez" encapsulates the speaker's epiphanic experience as a need to speak like Chapman in order to understand his Elizabethan Homeric world.¹⁵² The "archaeological" experience of listening

¹⁴⁸ See above, p. 255.

¹⁴⁹ See above, pp. 246–7.

¹⁵⁰ See above, p. 253.

¹⁵¹ "When Keats celebrated George Chapman's English rendering of Homer, even a well-intentioned critic noted that his recourse to a translation signalled insufficient intellectual acquirement": Roe (2012), 38; see also 'Introduction', this volume.

¹⁵² Important questions in criticism about Pope's Homer, Keats's restricted knowledge of ancient Greek, and the reference to Cortés and not to Balboa, are beyond the scope of this

to the “grand noise of the singer from Smyrna,” in Ronsard’s line mentioned above, or the Homeric hexameters of Dorat’s endorsement of du Bellay’s *Defense*, were totally different from the “aesthetic” experience of the speaker in Keats’s sonnet hearing Chapman’s English voice “loud and bold.” It was this latter experience that made Borges say that Keats’s “On First Looking into Chapman’s Homer” encapsulates “the poetic experience itself.”¹⁵³

Seferis never spoke of his reading of Keats’s “On First Looking into Chapman’s Homer.” But his attentive reading of Keats’s poetry, as attested by his letters from London during 1931–1932, permits us to argue that Keats’s Homeric/Chapmanian sonnet must have created in Seferis a reaction similar to that created in him by Keats’s poem “To Autumn”: on the one hand, a sense of strong affinity concerning the way in which Keats approached language, art, and nature as a “chameleon-poet;” and, on the other hand, a feeling of foreignness which made Seferis incapable of experiencing the “true miracle” expressed by Keats. In Keats’s “To Autumn” that miracle related to the English natural world; in “On First Looking into Chapman’s Homer” to Chapman’s Elizabethan Homeric voice. If in his poem “Hampstead” Seferis tried to express the miracle of the nature of his own homeland as an exile poet living close to his “neighbor” Keats, the poem “Upon a Line of Foreign Verse” was his attempt to express the miracle of his meeting with Homer: to “breathe” and “hear” Homer’s Greek voice and “see into” his world with the help and mediation of *Erotokritos* by Kornaros, a Cretan writer contemporary to Chapman. What prevails in Seferis’s Homeric world is a humble element. Instead of figures like Cortés the Conqueror, there are figures like the old mariners with tears in their eyes as in El Greco’s “Saint Peter.”

6 “Asine, Summer 1938–Athens, January 1940”: The Second World War, the Homeric “Catalogue of Ships,” and European Archaeological Excavations

In spring 1939 Seferis made a visit to Mycenae. He wrote in his diary: “Close to the acropolis there is an unusual tomb. An elegant stele of Pentelic marble bearing the inscription [in English]:

chapter. It must be noted, however, that Keats’s poem speaks about the experience of first seeing the Pacific Ocean by the Spanish conquistador Hernán Cortés and not about who was the first conquistador who saw the Pacific Ocean (Balboa).

153 Borges (2000), 4–5; see also “Introduction,” this volume.

Humfry Payne
 Scholar, Artist, Philhellene
 Born in England 1902
 'Mourn not for Adonais'"¹⁵⁴

The phrase in inverted commas is from Shelley's elegy *Adonais* on Keats's death. Payne was Director of the British School at Athens from 1929 until his untimely death in 1936. "I did not know him," Seferis wrote in the notes he kept for the Greek book with Keats's letters he was planning to prepare. It seems that Seferis had thought of including the inscription on Payne's grave stele in a prominent place in the book.¹⁵⁵

In that same entry in his diary Seferis noted that in a local taverna he saw a Swede, who was Axel Persson (as Seferis was told), the archaeologist "who was conducting excavations in the area of Nafplion."¹⁵⁶ This area included the archaeological site of Asine, which was bound to be connected with one of Seferis's most famous poems: "The King of Asine." In his Nobel Lecture, Seferis said: "I called [Axel Persson] my godfather, because Asine had given me a poem;" and he did not miss the opportunity to add that "when your King, His Majesty Gustaf VI Adolf, handed me the diploma of the Nobel Prize, I could not but remember with emotion the days when as Crown Prince he was determined to make his personal contribution to the excavations of the Acropolis of Asine."¹⁵⁷

"The King of Asine" is Seferis's first poem that used an archaeological site, that of Asine, as its setting ("On Aspalathoi ..." is his last one). A reference is also made to a specific archaeological artifact, namely a gold funeral mask like the "mask of Agamemnon." And the names of Homer and the *Iliad* appear for the first time in Seferis's poetry,¹⁵⁸ together with the phrase "Asinen te ..." [Ἀσίνην τε ...] from the Homeric "Catalogue of Ships" (*Iliad* 2.494–759). This section of the *Iliad* is a list of the Achaean contingents that sailed out of the harbor at Aulis in Boeotia (central Greece) against Troy, under the leadership of Agamemnon, King of Mycenae (or Argos).

"The King of Asine" bears the dateline "summer 1938–January 1940" and closes Seferis's collection *Logbook I* [Ημερολόγιο καταστρώματος Α'], which was

154 M3.119, "23 April [1939]." On the stele, Payne's specific dates of birth and death are also mentioned ("February 19, 1902;" "Died in Greece May 9, 1936").

155 See above, p. 255.

156 M3.117.

157 SNL.

158 See also below, p. 283.

published in April 1940. Seven months previously, on September 1, 1939, the German invasion of Poland had marked the beginning of the Second World War. *Logbook 1* has as an epigraph a few lines, in Greek translation, from Hölderlin's *Bread and Wine* [Brot und Wein], including the question: "And what is the use of poets in a mean-spirited time?" [und wozu Dichter in dürftiger Zeit?]¹⁵⁹ posed by a speaker who (like the speaker in Seferis's "Upon a Line of Foreign Verse") felt "without companions" [ohne Genossen]. This was a meaningful gesture in the historical context of the period. When E. M. Butler's book *The Tyranny of Greece over Germany* was published in 1935, it was immediately placed on the Nazi Index.¹⁶⁰ One of the book's eight chapters was entitled "The Martyr: Hölderlin (1770–1843)," and in her introduction to the book's 1958 edition Butler wrote: "Could Hölderlin, one asks oneself, even have existed under such a [Nazi] dispensation?" If Hölderlin spoke of "the devastating glory of the Greeks,"¹⁶¹ how did a modern Greek poet like Seferis experience that glory during those dark days? "The King of Asine" was an answer to the question.

Seferis spoke of his struggle with the poem: he wrote it eventually during one night without having any of his previous notes in front of him.¹⁶² Six drafts of the poem are found in the Seferis Archive bearing witness to this struggle. They are divided into two sets of three drafts each: in all probability the first set belongs to the year 1938 and the second to 1940. The two sets differ significantly: for example, an ironic tone prevails in the drafts of the first set, through a sort of opposition between the unknown King of insignificant Asine and the famous King of glorious Mycenae, that is, Agamemnon. By contrast, in the drafts of the second set such an ironic tone is not detectable, and the gold funeral mask appears here in relation to the King of Asine:

κι ο βασιλιάς της Ασίνης [...]
 άγνωστος λησμονημένος απ' όλους κι από τον Όμηρο
 μόνο μια λέξη στην Ιλιάδα κι εκείνη αβέβαιη
 ριγμένη εδώ σαν την εντάφια χρυσή προσωπίδα.
 Την άγγιξες, θυμάσαι τον ήχο της; [...]

[and the king of Asine [...]
 unknown, forgotten by all even by Homer

159 Seferis did not know German; he read Hölderlin through translations.

160 Butler (1958), vii.

161 See Butler (1958), ix.

162 On the poem and its drafts, see Yatromanolakis (1986).

only one word in the *Iliad* and that uncertain
 thrown down here like a gold funeral mask.
 You touched it. Remember its sound? [...]

lines 13–17¹⁶³

The reference to the gold funeral mask clearly alludes to Sikelianos's poem "Yannis Keats," in which the gold "mask of Agamemnon" plays a key role, as we saw.¹⁶⁴ It is through this intertext that a Keatsian tone in Seferis's poem has been acknowledged in criticism, especially in the way in which the speaker meditates on poetry and mortality, reminding of Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn." Yet in "The King of Asine" the dialogue with Keats is not only mediated through Sikelianos, but it is also direct and intimate. The history of the poem is telling in this respect too.

Almost all of the poem's aspects that have been associated with Sikelianos, and through him with Keats, come from the second set of drafts, that of 1940, and more precisely from the last two drafts. In addition to the gold death mask, the poem's long meditative section on mortality (lines 22–54), to which the references to statues also belong ("and his children statues / [...] / image of a form [...] turned to stone" [και τα παιδιά του αγάλματα / [...] / εικόνα μορφής που μαρμάρωσε [...]] (lines 23 and 53)), was added, to its greatest part, to the very last draft. But, most importantly, from the very last draft (and even from the final published version) also come two elements directly connected to Seferis's attested reading of Keats: first, the key phrase "the poet – a void" [Ο ποιητής ένα κενό], a phrase which brings to mind Keats's "chameleon-poet," the poet-with-no-identity, with whom Seferis closed his essay "Monologue on Poetry" in spring 1939, when, as we saw, he was reading Keats's letters attentively and saw Payne's tomb in Mycenae. And, secondly, the phrase "the *bird* that flew away the other winter | *with broken wing*" [Και το πουλί που πέταξε τον άλλο χειμώνα / με σπασμένη φτερούγα] (lines 32–3; emphasis added), a quotation of the first line of Seferis's poem "Hampstead," accompanied by a temporal pointer to a past winter. The latter element in particular shows that in the last drafts of "The King of Asine" Seferis intimately linked the poem with his Hampstead poems. As we saw, among them was "Upon a Line of Foreign Verse," Seferis's first poem preoccupied with the voice of Homer. It is thus worth looking more closely at this internal, as it were, dialogue of Seferis with his own Homeric poem written in Hampstead in 1931 close to his "neighbor" Keats.

In "The King of Asine" the setting is full of "hollow" sounds:

¹⁶³ Ricks (1989), 159.

¹⁶⁴ See above, pp. 259–60.

[...] θυμάσαι τον ήχο της; κούφιο μέσα στο φως
σαν το στεγνό πιθάρι στο σκαμμένο χώμα·
κι ο ίδιος ήχος μες στη θάλασσα με τα κουπιά μας

[[...] its sound? Hollow in the light
like a dry jar in dug earth:
the same sound that our oars make in the sea.]

lines 17–19

Within this backdrop of hollow sounds, only two clearly distinct (and interrelated) sounds appear: “the soul that sought the lower world gibbering” [η ψυχή που γύρευε τσιρίζοντας τον κάτω κόσμο] (line 37) and the sound made by a bat that marks the end of the poem:

κι από το βάθος της σπηλιάς μια νυχτερίδα τρομαγμένη
χτύπησε πάνω στο φως σαν τη σαΐτα πάνω στο σκουτάρι:
“Άσίνην τε Άσίνην τε ...” Να ’ταν αυτή ο βασιλιάς της Άσίνης
που τον γυρεύουμε τόσο προσεχτικά σε τούτη την ακρόπολη
γγίζοντας κάποτε με τα δάχτυλά μας την αφή του πάνω στις πέτρες.

[[...] from the depths of the cave a startled bat
struck on the light like an arrow on a shield:
Άσίνην τε Άσίνην τε ... Perhaps that might have been the king of Asine
for whom we have been searching so carefully on this acropolis,
sometimes feeling with our fingers his touch on the rocks.]

lines 56–end

“If this is an epiphany it represents something of an anticlimax,” Katerina Krikos-Davis remarks.¹⁶⁵ Certainly, like in the poem “Upon a Line of Foreign Verse,” the Homeric experience of the speaker in “The King of Asine” is much humbler than the epiphany in Keats’s “On First Looking into Chapman’s Homer,” in which the speaker heard Chapman speaking out “loud and bold” and felt like Cortés staring at the Pacific “upon a peak in Darien.” At the same time, in “The King of Asine” the question of the continuity of language is as pivotal as it was in “Upon a Line of Foreign Verse.” Yet, there is a noticeable difference between the two poems: in “Upon a Line of Foreign Verse” the speaker only sees the hands of the shade of “great Odysseus,” while listening to his

165 Krikos-Davis (2002), 204.

whisper (lines 10 and 23),¹⁶⁶ in “The King of Asine” the speaker feels the touch of the anonymous Iliadic king on the stones, however elusive and insignificant this king might be or however inarticulate his voice is.

As we saw, in “Upon a Line of Foreign Verse” the speaker was surrounded by foreign lands. By contrast, in “The King of Asine” the speaker, a poet, is surrounded by a familiar landscape, like the one longed for by the speaker of “Hampstead.” Unsurprisingly in “The King of Asine” the sea plays a central role from the start: “where the sea / [...] / received us like time without an opening in it” [εκεί που η θάλασσα / [...] / μας δέχτηκε όπως ο καιρός χωρίς κανένα χάσμα] (line 2 and 4). It is this embeddedness in the landscape that makes the speaker of “The King of Asine” contemplate art, language, and mortality through images of a humble locality, hollow sounds, and elusive touches. This also accounts for the difference in the sense of mortality between “The King of Asine” and Keats’s “Ode on a Grecian Urn” or “On Seeing the Elgin Marbles.” In Seferis’s poem the “poet-a-void” speaks of the experience of ancient sites and antiquities as seen (and touched) from within, and in relation to, their natural landscape, not as seen in a book or in a museum. This landscape is always depicted by Seferis as humble, like, for example, in the poem “Bottle in the Sea” [Μποτίλια στο πέλαγο] from his collection *Novel* (1935): “Three rocks, a few burnt pines, a lone chapel / and farther above / the same landscape repeated starts again” [Τρεις βράχοι λίγα καμένα πεύκα κι ένα ρημοκλήσι / και παραπάνω / το ίδιο τοπίο αντιγραφωμένο ξαναρχίζει] (lines 1–3). The use of the word “acropolis” in “The King of Asine” is indicative of Seferis’s approach. This is the first and only time that the word occurs in his poetry (a *hapax*). Yet it does not refer to the renowned Acropolis of Athens. In Seferis’s poetry the word “acropolis” is only used for the almost unknown site of Asine.

7 British Colonial Cyprus 1953–1955 or On First Looking into Homer’s World: The Ruins of Enkomi, the Nets of Angels, and the “Honey of the Sun”

In autumn 1953, while serving as the Greek ambassador in Beirut, Seferis visited for the first time the island of Cyprus, which had been under British rule since 1878. He described the visit as “the revelation of a world and the experience of a human drama that [...] is the measure and judge of our humanity. [...] Cyprus is a place where the miracle still functions.”¹⁶⁷ Seferis’s Cypriot

¹⁶⁶ See above, p. 272.

¹⁶⁷ P443–4.

collection, *Logbook III* [Ημερολόγιο καταστρώματος Γ'], was published a few months after the start of the Cypriot armed anti-colonial struggle in April 1955, which led to the creation of the Republic of Cyprus in 1960.¹⁶⁸ In his capacity as the Greek ambassador in London 1957–1962, Seferis took part in the negotiations over the postcolonial status of the island, and his involvement had a strictly professional and, at the same time, highly personal element.¹⁶⁹ For him Cyprus was connected with a sense of Hellenism beyond the boundaries of the Greek nation-state and thus with the life he himself had lived as a child in Smyrna and the neighboring village of Skala.¹⁷⁰ Memory plays a dominant role in the collection: suffice it only to mention the poem “Memory II,” bearing the subtitle “Ephesus,” the name of the ancient city and archaeological site in Asia Minor.

In *Logbook III* various places and objects, sites and artifacts appear, combined with references to various texts relating to the different periods of the island and their special character: ancient, Byzantine, Frankish, Venetian, Ottoman, British. At the same time, various references (direct or indirect) are made to Britain and British literature, starting from the Elizabethan period with a quotation from Shakespeare’s *Othello*: “You are welcome, sirs, to Cyprus. Goats and Monkeys!” (“Neophytos the Recluse Speaks,” line 12; with *Othello*, Act 4, sc. 1, line 263). In the collection, the name of Homer makes its second appearance in Seferis’s poetry after “The King of Asine,”¹⁷¹ in a double quotation of Auden’s phrase “Homer’s world, not ours.” As we saw, Seferis commented on Auden’s phrase in his 1968 essay “Digressions from the Homeric Hymns,” in which he expanded on the notions of “Greek Hellenism” and “European Hellenism” (although without using the specific terms).¹⁷²

Auden’s phrase “Homer’s world, not ours” appears twice in the poem “In the Kyrenia District” [Στα περίχωρα της Κερύνειας]: first (in the original) in one of the poem’s mottoes and then (in Greek translation) in the mouth of one of the two British ladies who converse in the poem [αυτός ο κόσμος δεν είναι ο δικός μας, είναι του Ομήρου] (line 40). “In the Kyrenia District” touches on the questions of translation and cultural transferability, with the dialogue of the two British

168 On the collection and bibliography, see Krikos-Davis (2002) and Papazoglou (2002). In its first edition the collection was entitled “Cyprus where I was ordained ...” [Κύπρον οὐ μ’ ἐθέσπισεν ...] after Euripides’ *Helen* (line 148).

169 On Seferis’s role in the negotiations and his disagreements, see Hatzivassiliou (2019) with bibliography.

170 See above, p. 272.

171 The only other time is the poem “The Letter to Rex Warner” [Γράμμα στον Rex Warner], published in the posthumous *Book of Exercises II*.

172 See above, p. 252.

ladies being presented as taking place in Greek. The setting of the poem is a house in the Kyrenia district facing the medieval ruins of St Hilarion. “It would be difficult to find a place in the Mediterranean closer to the English ideal,” one reads in an English tourist guide.¹⁷³ The whole ambience is indeed reminiscent of the autobiographical *Our Home in Cyprus* by Esmé Scott-Stevenson, the wife of the Civil Commissioner of Kyrenia, back in 1880. The two ladies talk casually about the landscape, native Cypriots, and above all common British friends. We hear, for example, of a poet friend, “a cynic and philhellene” [κυνικός και φιλέλλην] (lines 18 and 22);¹⁷⁴ and of another friend, named Bill, who was killed in Crete (line 49) – that is, in the Battle of Crete in May 1941, when Greek and Allied forces defended the island in the Second World War.

References to the common resistance against the Axis powers play a central role in another poem of the collection, “Salamis in Cyprus” [Σαλαμίνα της Κύπρου], in which we hear the speaker saying: “Friends from the other war / [...] / I think of you as the day turns” [Φίλοι του άλλου πολέμου / [...] / σας συλλογίζομαι καθώς γυρίζει η μέρα] (lines 35 and 37). The setting this time is the archaeological site of Salamis in Cyprus: “the beach covered with fragments of ancient jars. / The columns insignificant; only the church of St Epiphanius” [τ’ ακρογιαλί γεμάτο θρύψαλα παλιά πιθάρια. Ασήμαντες οι κολόνες· μονάχα ο Άγιος Επιφάνιος] (lines 2–3). The insignificance of the remains and the name of the saint, which evokes the miracle of Epiphany, are followed by a colonial reference, apparently in relation to the ancient or Byzantine past of the place: the “sunken might of the much-golden Empire” [χωνεμένη τη δύναμη της πολύχρυσης αυτοκρατορίας] (line 4).¹⁷⁵ Yet not only does the word “empire” (a *hapax* in Seferis’s poetry) point to the British empire in the context of colonial Cyprus, but its combination with the adjective “πολύχρυσης” (another *hapax*) also brings Mycenae into the web of allusions: “much-golden” was a standard Homeric adjective for Mycenae (πολυχρύσοιο Μυκήνης, e.g., *Iliad* 7.180). At the same time, the very beginning of Thucydides’ *History of the Peloponnesian War* might be brought to mind, where the ancient historian referred to Mycenae in order to claim that if a mighty contemporary city “were to become deserted, with only the temples and the foundations of buildings left to the view [...] with the passage of time future generations would find it very hard to credit its reputed

173 P448.

174 As shown in criticism, this might well be an allusion to Lawrence Durrell. For Seferis’s opposition to Durrell’s acceptance of the post of Director of Information Services on the island, see RB.316–17.

175 In the poem’s motto from Aeschylus’ *Persians* (line 892) the colonial relationship between Salamis in Cyprus and Salamis in Greece is also named: “Salamis, whose metropolis (or mother-city) [...]” [Σαλαμίνα τε / τὰς νῦν μητρόπολιν].

power" (1.10).¹⁷⁶ Thucydides was a favorite author of Seferis, and Thucydidean allusions are detected throughout his work (including *Logbook III*), sometimes in combination with Homeric allusions.¹⁷⁷

A phrase similar to the "sunken might" [χωνεμένη δύναμη] in "Salamis in Cyprus" appears in the last poem of the collection, "Enkomi" (or "Engomi") [Ἐγκωμη]¹⁷⁸ – a further poem set in another archaeological site on the island, from the Mycenaean period, close to Salamis. In "Enkomi" the phrase used is "spent might" [ξοδεμένη δύναμη] and is combined with the very word "archaeologist," another *hapax* in Seferis's poetry:

Η ανατομία μιας ξοδεμένης δύναμης κάτω απ' το μάτι
του αρχαιολόγου του ναρκοδότη ή του χειρουργού.

[the anatomy of a spent might under the eye
of the archaeologist, anaesthetist or surgeon.]

lines 12–13

The phrase "the eye of the archaeologist" evokes, once more, Seferis's distinction between the "historical, archaeological" and the "aesthetic" emotional motives, which he drew in the essay "Monologue on Poetry" speaking of how one might see the Acropolis of Athens for the first time. In "Enkomi" it is the "aesthetic" emotional motive of the speaker that permits an epiphanic experience to take place: the sudden view of a "motionless dance" [χορός ακίνητος] (line 31)¹⁷⁹ of an unnamed female worker in the excavation, as she is turned momentarily into a statue in ascension – an allusion to both the Virgin Mary and Aphrodite, the ancient goddess of Cyprus.

In "Enkomi" the way in which mobility and immobility are intertwined with the themes of life, love and death, art and mortality, is arguably comparable to Keats's *ekphrastic* "Ode on a Grecian Urn," in which the speaker describes the marble's "silent form" (line 44). But in Seferis's poem, on the one hand, the vision of the speaker entails a passage from mobility to immobility, not vice-versa as in Keats's poem. And, on the other hand, and again unlike Keats's poem, the emphasis is not on an artifact seen on the page of a book or in a museum, but on a statue ascending from ruins unearthed from within their

176 Trans. by Martin Hammond. As an example of a mighty contemporary city, Thucydides referred to Sparta.

177 For the importance of Thucydides in Seferis, see Tambakaki (2017); see also above, p. 247.

178 The poem "The Cats of St Nicholas" [Οι γάτες τ' Ἀι-Νικόλα] (1969) was added in posthumous editions together with a blank page which separates it from "Enkomi."

179 On similar imagery and expressions, see D2.76–7 and D2.142–3.

natural landscape and in connection to the history of the place: the excavated ancient city was a polis and a necropolis at the same time, a place where the living and the dead resided close to each other, with family tombs lying in house yards. This practice was connected with the geography and the place of Cyprus itself: the same practice was found in Ugarit, on the neighboring coasts of Syria.¹⁸⁰

Unlike “The King of Asine,” which closes *Logbook I* with the “epiphany” of the king of Asine as a sort of “anticlimax,”¹⁸¹ “Enkomi” closes *Logbook III* with an impressive epiphany, which also represents a climax in Seferis’s “Homer’s world.” In fact, “Enkomi” represents the ultimate example of the miraculous experience described in the opening poem of the collection, “Agianapa I”:

Και βλέπεις το φως του ήλιου καθώς έλεγαν οι παλαιοί.
 Ωστόσο νόμιζα πως έβλεπα τόσα χρόνια
 [...]
 παράξενο, δεν πρόσεχα πως έβλεπα μόνο τη φωνή τους.
 [...]
 [...] το βλέπω εδώ το φως του ήλιου· το χρυσό δίχτυ
 όπου τα πράγματα σπαρταρούν σαν τα ψάρια
 που ένας μεγάλος άγγελος τραβά
 μαζί με τα δίχτυα των ψαράδων.

[And you see the light of the sun, as the ancients used to say.
 And yet I thought I was seeing all these years
 [...]
 Strange, I didn’t notice that I saw their voices only.
 [...]
 [...] here I see the light of the sun; the gold net
 where things quiver like fish
 that a huge angel draws in
 along with the nets of the fishermen.]
 lines 1–2, 5, 14–17 (end)

Arguably, in “Agianapa I” Seferis seems to be able, at last, to write a Greek counterpart of Keats’s “On First Looking into Chapman’s Homer,” or, in other words,

180 See Papantoniou (2018), 8 on how the French archaeologist Claude Schaeffer recognized this coexistence thanks to his excavation experience in Ugarit. Seferis had also visited Ugarit (or Ras Shamra); see M6.133.

181 See above, p. 281.

a poem which can be seen as a Greek variation on the theme “On First Looking into Homer’s World.”¹⁸²

Seferis’s “Agianapa 1” is about the difference between a pre- and post-Cyprus experience of the speaker in the same way that Keats’s “On First Looking into Chapman’s Homer” is about the difference between a pre- and post-Chapman experience. Just as in Keats’s poem, in “Agianapa 1” the word “yet” [ωστόσο] marks a dividing-line in the speaker’s experience, a moment of rapture, which is both visual and Homeric. For what “the ancients used to say” (line 1) is exactly the Homeric phrase “the light of the sun” [φάος ἡλείοιο], which appears in an emphatic way in its modern Greek equivalent (το φως του ήλιου; lines 1 and 14). As we saw, in his Nobel Lecture Seferis quoted the same Homeric phrase in order to speak of a familiarity he experiences “that is akin to a collective soul rather than to an intellectual effort.”¹⁸³

It is in this Homeric context that Seferis’s two 1931 poems “Upon a Line of Foreign Verse” and “Hampstead” can be brought into the discussion once more. For one thing, what prevails in the former is exactly the *voice* of the shade of Odysseus and in the latter angels appear dancing “naked as steel” in a wintry London setting. In “Agianapa 1” a similar Homeric voice is transformed into a gold net drawn by huge angels in a glowing setting – an image which evokes the angels with huge wings in Cypriot sacred iconography,¹⁸⁴ at the same time clearly pointing to the fishermen disciples of Christ. Prime among them was Peter, the saint depicted in El Greco’s small portrait at the National Gallery in London, which had impressed Seferis deeply, as we saw. The miraculous catch of fish after a fruitless night of fishing and when the sun had well arisen (Luke 5.1–11; cf. and John 21.1–14) is detectable here.

Angels make a second appearance in *Logbook III* – which is also their last in Seferis’s poetry – in the poem “Details on Cyprus”: “Angels unwound the heavens” [Άγγελοι ξετυλίγανε τον ουρανό] (line 6).¹⁸⁵ In the same poem, the collective soul of which Seferis spoke in his Noble Lecture finds its most intimate voice:

Όμως το ξύλινο μαγκανοπήγαδο – τ’ αλακάτιν,
[...]
μισό στο χώμα και μισό μέσα στο νερό,
γιατί δοκίμασες να το ξυπνήσεις;

182 Cf. D2.56, the question posed by Seferis in 1948: “how can one look into the *Odyssey*?”

183 See above, p. 255.

184 See Tambakaki (2019a), 53.

185 On Seferis’s poem and bibliography, see Thomaidou-Morou (2005).

Είδες πώς βόγκηξε. Κι εκείνη την κραυγή
βγαλμένη απ' τα παλιά νεύρα του ξύλου
γιατί την είπες φωνή πατρίδας;

[But the wooden well-wheel – the *alakatin*

[...]

Half in the earth and half in the water

why did you try to wake it?

You saw how it moaned. And that cry,
brought forth from the wood's old nerves,
why did you call it homeland's voice?]

lines 17, 19–end

The word “ἀλακάτιν” was used in both Cyprus and Seferis's native Smyrna for a wooden well-wheel. But it was also a word *from Homer*: in Homer the word ἡλακάτη means a distaff, a tool used in spinning, a central household activity, e.g., of Helen and Andromache in the *Iliad* (3.125 and 6.491, respectively) or Penelope in the *Odyssey* (1.357). In “Details on Cyprus” Seferis thus anchors, as it were, the Homeric voice on a homeland's soil, encoding, in a much subtler way, what he had written in 1931 in “Upon a Line of Foreign Verse,” about “our tongue, as it was spoken three thousand years ago.”¹⁸⁶ Like the whisper of Odysseus in his 1931 poem, the “homeland's voice” in Seferis's “Details on Cyprus” is in total contrast to “the grand noise of the singer from Smyrna,” according to Ronsard, or the way in which Dorat spoke of “the language of one's country” in Homeric Greek hexameters, in his endorsement of du Bellay's *Defense and Enrichment of the French Language*.¹⁸⁷

Logbook III rounds off Seferis's Homeric/Odyssean cycle that started in earnest in 1931, in an intense dialogue with works of European Hellenism, among them works of his Hampstead “neighbor” Keats. It is perhaps no surprise that in Seferis's collection inspired by his visits to British colonial Cyprus the more intimate vestige of his dialogue with Keats can also be detected – precisely in the poem “Details on Cyprus”:

[...] στο μέλι του ήλιου
εδώ ή αλλού, τώρα, στα περασμένα: χόρευε
μ' ένα τέτοιο ρυθμό το φθινόπωρο.

¹⁸⁶ See above, p. 275.

¹⁸⁷ On Ronsard and Dorat, see above, pp. 272–3 and 275.

[[...] to the honey of the sun
here or elsewhere, now, in the past; the autumn
dancing to that kind of rhythm.]

lines 3–5

This is the only appearance of the word “honey” [μέλι] in Seferis’s poetry and the only reference to autumn in *Logbook III*. This was the season during which the “miracle” of Cyprus took place: as Seferis wrote, he experienced this miracle during his first visit to the island in the autumn of 1953. In the poem “Details on Cyprus” the speaker seems to have found at last what Seferis was searching for in London in 1931–1934, when he was unable to experience the “true miracle” of the “vast honey color” of the autumn sun as expressed in Keats’s “To Autumn,” longing instead for small details of *epichoria*.¹⁸⁸

Among the “Details” of this Cypriot poem there are also scenes with which a monk decorates a *koloka*. *Koloka* is the word used in Cyprus for dried gourds, which are engraved with various designs according to the folk tradition and are used as receptacles or decorative objects. Seferis was fascinated by this folk art and had even thought of entitling his Cypriot collection *Kolokes* (plural of *koloka*).¹⁸⁹ In “Details on Cyprus” the scenes engraved on the *koloka* related to the Second Coming (although the words themselves are not used). Together with the underworld, the Second Coming is a recurrent theme in Seferis’s poetry. We have already seen the dog in “Hampstead” searching “for its master / or the Second Coming / or a bone.” If the “honey of the sun” brings to mind the imagery of Keats’s “To Autumn,” the *ekphrasis* of the Cypriot *koloka* in the poem “Details on Cyprus” evokes not only “the swollen gourd” of the same poem by Keats, but again Keats’s famous ekphrastic “Hellenic” poems. But once more, instead of a “high” artwork like a Grecian urn, the decorated *koloka*, a sort of folk urn (ὕδρις), provides an *ekphrasis* of a humble “low” folk artwork of the Hellenic world.

8 Conclusions

In his Nobel Banquet speech, speaking in French, Seferis said: “I belong to a small country. A rocky promontory in the Mediterranean, it has nothing to distinguish it but the efforts of its people, the sea, and the light of the sun.”¹⁹⁰

188 See above, pp. 263 and 266–7; and M3.236–7.

189 This is the title of Krikos-Davis’s (2002) study on Seferis’s collection.

190 Seferis Nobel Banquet speech: <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1963/seferis/speech/>.

Seferis was speaking “from the perspective of the nation’s margin and the migrants’ exile”¹⁹¹ – something particularly evident in his Cypriot poems. And in his defense of what he called “Greek Hellenism” (intimately connected with how he conceived of “Homer’s World,” in Auden’s words), he engaged in a contrapuntal dialogue with what he called “European Hellenism.” The question of the Renaissance was central to this dialogue. In contrast to the way many modern European intellectuals and artists, such as Bergman, spoke of the “significant” (ancient) Greek civilization, the “dead” Greek language, and an “insignificant” modern Greek culture, Seferis defended his alterity as a modern Greek poet by providing what might be called an “encomium of the insignificant.” A key role in it was played by the Greek landscape and language; and a token of it (and at the same time of Seferis’s own aspirations) was the small-scale painting of “Saint Peter” by the Cretan-Spanish Renaissance painter El Greco, exhibited at the National Gallery in London. As Seferis pointed out time and again, the painting’s model reminded him of a Cretan boatman and of the Cretan romance *Erotokritos*. That same Cretan figure seems to have served as the model for the shade of Odysseus in Seferis’s poem “Upon a Line of Foreign Verse,” written in London exactly in those days in which Seferis placed his discovery of Eliot.

In Seferis’s poetic quest Keats was a sort of English Romantic brother-poet – an interlocutor who helped him express poetically the “miracle” of his “Homer’s world.” Keats’s sensibilities and approach to nature and language, life and art, seem to have caused Seferis a feeling of strong affinity and, at the same time, foreignness. Key “Hellenic” works by Keats such as “On Seeing the Elgin Marbles,” “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” and, above all, “On First Looking into Chapman’s Homer” (which also poses the question of the Renaissance) must have been for him at least as challenging as Keats’s poem “To Autumn.” In a letter he wrote from London, Seferis expressed his inability to “taste” the “true miracle” of English nature as it was depicted in that particular poem by Keats, longing instead for “a single pine needle.”

This chapter aimed to trace vestiges of Seferis’s intimate dialogue with Keats for the first time. In addition to his translation of Keats’s “La Belle Dame sans Merci” in London in 1924 and references to Keats in his letters from London during his second stay there in 1931–1934 (when he lived for a few months in Hampstead, close to his “neighbor” Keats, as he said), there is also Seferis’s expressed wish to publish a book with selected letters by Keats, translated into Greek and accompanied by a biographical note and introduction. Some notes about this publication are found in the Seferis Archive. Although the

191 For the expression, see Bhabha (2004), 200 on the historian Eric Hobsbawm.

plan was never realized, a double reference to Keats's "chameleon-poet," the poet-with-no-identity, in two of Seferis's most well-known essays, "Monologue on Poetry" and "A Scenario for 'Thrush,'" suggests that the "chameleon-poet" would have had pride of place in Seferis's introduction to the Greek edition of Keats, also in relation to Eliot's formulation about the poet's "continual extinction of personality."

The way in which Seferis concluded his Nobel Lecture on "Modern Greek Tradition," in which he also referred again to El Greco and touched on the question of the Renaissance, drew on the same theme, with an explicit reference to Homer: "I have come to the end. I thank you for your patience. I am also grateful that 'the bounty of Sweden'¹⁹² [la générosité de la Suède] has permitted me in the end to feel a 'nobody' – understanding this word in the sense that Ulysses gave it [dans le sens que lui donnait Ulysse] when he replied to the Cyclops Polyphemus: 'outis' [οὔτις] – *nobody*, in that mysterious current which is Greece [*personne*, dans ce mystérieux courant: la Grèce]."¹⁹³

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192 See Yeats (1925), to which Seferis also referred at the beginning of his lecture.

193 Seferis Nobel Lecture: <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1963/seferis/lecture/>.

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Belated Return

The Encounter of Modern Hebrew Poetry with the Graeco-Roman Classics

Giddon Ticotsky

Hebraism and Hellenism – between these two points of influence
moves our world.

MATTHEW ARNOLD¹



The ties that bind the Graeco-Roman and Hebrew cultures together are strong and convoluted, from as early as their beginnings in ancient times. This chapter deals with the encounter of modern Hebrew poetry with the Graeco-Roman classical tradition, situating it in the polarized relations between the two cultures, as well as in their close and symbiotic interactions. Complex historical residues played a role in the relatively belated reception of Graeco-Roman elements in modern Hebrew literature. And while they contributed to the shaping of Hebrew literature as part of modern European culture, these elements were not integrated deeply into it. It was only after the Second World War that a window of opportunity for a common cross-cultural destiny opened up, when Hebrew writers saw the shared platform of the two cultures as a bulwark against fascism. At the same time, the belatedness in the reception of

¹ Arnold (1993), 110 (from *Culture and Anarchy* (1869)). I began writing this chapter at Stanford University and completed it at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. I would like to thank the Institutes that have supported me during that period: Taube Center for Jewish Studies at Stanford, Israel Institute in Washington DC, and the Mandel Scholion – Interdisciplinary Research Center in the Humanities and Jewish Studies, Faculty of Humanities, Hebrew University of Jerusalem. I also extend my deep gratitude to Polina Tambakaki who has inspired me to venture on this research journey – she has shown exceptional kindness and patience throughout. Ami Asher translated my text with great talent. My discussions about the chapter with Haim Be'er, Aminadav Dykman and Israel J. Yuval helped me considerably in formulating it. Yaacov Shavit's *Athens in Jerusalem: Classical Antiquity and Hellenism in the Making of the Modern Secular Jew* (1997) was also extremely helpful in acquainting me with the contacts between the cultures.

elements of the Graeco-Roman classical tradition in Hebrew poetry prevented them from being “eroded,” as it were, by the Biblical corpus (the main point of reference of Hebrew literature) – by becoming, for example, objects of irony or parody.

1 Graeco-Roman and Hebrew Cultures: Residues of the Past

In the course of its bicentennial history – it is customary to mark its beginning at the middle or end of the eighteenth century – modern Hebrew literature had to catch up with political, sociocultural, and artistic developments that had taken place much more gradually in Europe. It had to “chew up and swallow,” as it were, rapidly and at times simultaneously, Classicism and Neo-Classicism, Sentimentalism, Romanticism, Realism, Naturalism, Symbolism, and many other artistic movements without having the time to taste or digest them. It is as if the clock of modern Hebrew literature is as twisted and melting as in the famous painting “The Persistence of Memory” by Salvador Dalí.

The twisted clock of Hebrew literature shows that its European time is relatively young. But, at the same time, it always shows another time: Jewish and ancient Israelite time. In this parallel temporality, modern Hebrew literature is a belated scion of ancient Hebrew literature, starting with the Bible more than two thousand years ago. The relation between the two literatures is more than symbolic – it is organic. Almost any contemporary work of Hebrew literature echoes ancient texts, consciously or unconsciously: for one thing, the rate of ancient Hebrew words in contemporary texts is 80%.² Moreover, throughout generations, Jewish culture has been characterized by exceptional inter- and intra-textual sensitivities, to the point where it is almost impossible to avoid alluding to its ancient origins.

Thus, tracing the reception of Greek and Roman cultures in modern Hebrew literature requires a dual perspective – both synchronic and diachronic, both modern and archaic. In other words, against the background of contemporary representations of these cultures in Hebrew literature, one must at all times be conscious of the history of their complex relations with ancient Jewish culture. Deep in the contemporary clock of Hebrew culture ticks its ancient clock.

2 Nir (2007), 249. In 1911 the Hebrew author and intellectual Micha Josef Berdyczewski [מיכאל יוסף ברדיצ'בסקי] (1865–1921) wrote about this duality: on the one hand, the Hebrew writer “wants to unshackle the burden of generations, while on the other he ties the next knot; he himself is but another link in the chain he aims to break [...] This poetry is *the poetry of the tear in the heart*” (Berdyczewski ((1952), 174) italics in the original). All translations are by Ami Asher, unless otherwise noted.

Ancient Jewish culture was in constant and fundamental conflict with both Greek and Roman cultures.³ This was not only an intense national and territorial conflict, but also a religious-identity one that has determined, to a great degree, the self-perception of the Jewish people across generations: a life-or-death struggle between the first monotheistic religion and rival polytheistic religions. The conflict began when Alexander the Great occupied the Levant in 332 BCE (the siege and capture of Tyre, in Phoenicia, now Lebanon) and Hellenic culture began to dominate the region. It remained dominant, in fact, even during the short period of Jewish sovereignty (the last one before the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948), from about 140 BCE until the Roman invasion in 63 BCE. The Islamic occupation of Palestine in the mid-seventh century CE marked the end of the period when the Jews were dominated by the Roman (and later Byzantine) civilization, which in 313 CE (the Edict of Milan) became Christian.⁴

But even when Jewish culture was no longer politically subordinate to the Graeco-Roman civilization, the latter continued to be regarded as its typological enemy. Starting from the first centuries CE, in Jewish discourse, Rome and its culture were identified with Edom, a people described as the bitter enemy of the Children of Israel, particularly in Biblical times. “As soon as Edom became synonymous with Rome,” writes Israeli historian Israel Jacob Yuval, “all prophecies of future revenge were shifted in one fell swoop from Edom to Rome, along with the expectation of its fall and ruin at the End of Days.”⁵ Greek has also remained engraved in Jewish cultural memory in negative terms. To this day, Hebrew speakers often use the term “Hellenizers” [מתִּייוֹנִים] to refer not strictly to Jews who have been acculturated to Hellenic civilization (as in its original sense), but as a byword for traitors – those who have given up their Jewish identity and denied their origins out of convenience.

Next to this pessimistic narrative, one may find an optimistic one that seeks to stress the ongoing dialogue between the rival cultures. Hundreds of Greek words have been adopted in Hebrew, to the point that even native speakers fail to notice their foreign origin; well over three thousand Greek and Latin loanwords have been documented in rabbinic literature.⁶ Moreover, the autonomous leadership institutes of Jews in the Hellenistic Empire evolved

3 Another culture that had religious and territorial conflict, but only with one of the two cultures (the Roman one), is Islamic-Arab culture, if we count the Byzantine Empire as the direct continuation of Rome.

4 The Edict of Milan made Christianity legal. The Edict of Thessalonica (380 CE) made Christianity the state religion of the Roman Empire.

5 Yuval (2006), 10.

6 Levine (1998), 7. See also: Rosén (1979); Shoal-Dudai (2019).

according to the Greek bureaucratic model and borrowed their names from it. A prominent example is the chief halachic council called Sanhedrin [סנהדרין], from the Greek word for council *synedrion* (συνέδριον). Today, the Knesset – Israel's parliament – owes much to these structural arrangements. And the Greek frame of mind may have had a significant impact on the very roots of Jewish religious law (Halacha [הלכה]). Israeli historian Daniel R. Schwartz writes:

The Greek tendency to refer to visible things (deeds as well as objects) as representative of invisible things that are more primary and essential forms the basis of two highly important tendencies in the history of Jewish culture, as it developed out of its contacts with Hellenism: classification and universalism. [...] The willingness to produce universal categories, which for the Jews (as for the Greeks and Romans) is fundamental to the ability to create both philosophical and legal literature [...], leads directly to universalism also with reference to human beings.⁷

Schwartz's argument leads to two fundamental conclusions. First, Judaism – as religion, ethnicity and culture – has always moved between two poles: on the one hand, withdrawal and isolation, and, on the other, openness to the world; in each period, this tension takes a different shape and transforms Judaism.⁸ The second conclusion, deriving from the same pendulum movement, is that one must question the homogeneity of Jewish thought, and rather assume that throughout its history it accumulated alien sediments – just as Christian theology is not homogeneous and has received multiple external influences throughout generations, whether consciously or unconsciously. This is a methodological note that should remain in the background of any discussion of the relations between Judaism and Hellenism, or between modern Hebrew literature and the Graeco-Roman classics: none of these corpuses is monolithic or static; in fact, they are fundamentally heterogeneous and dynamic.⁹ Moreover, our very ideas regarding ancient civilizations – Jewish, Greek-Hellenistic, Roman, and others – have been irrevocably rewritten since the rise of modernity,

⁷ Schwartz (2007), 194.

⁸ Nachman Syrkin (1868–1924), one of the leading intellectuals of socialist Zionism, argued that Jewish culture was open to external influences when it was strong, and withdrew away from them in times of weakness and crisis (Syrkin (1938)).

⁹ To illustrate the heterogeneity of Greek culture, we can invoke the differences between the Athenian civilization at its apex in the fifth century BCE and the civilization created in the East following Alexander the Great's conquests about a century later; or the cultural, legal, and moral differences between the Greek city-states themselves, for example, between Athens and Sparta.

secularism (with its scientific research), and nationalism in Europe. To a great extent, our conceptions of the three ancient cultures that are the subject of this chapter have been reborn since that time, the eighteenth century, in view of those historical transformations.

It is worth mentioning here the years-long preoccupation with the question of the origin of cultures – perhaps “origins” would be more appropriate. In ancient times, this discussion had a religious, mostly polemical nature, with one of the two ancient cultures, Jewish or Greek, usually vying for the coveted status of originality.¹⁰ To mention only one example: an ancient Jewish legend tells that after conquering Jerusalem, Alexander entrusted King Solomon’s library to his teacher, the philosopher Aristotle, who then proceeded to copy and translate the texts under his own name (!).¹¹ This is one of several folktales that Israeli historian Yaacov Shavit calls “the theft of wisdom.”¹² Apparently, the more explicitly separationist they present Judaism to be, the more open to, and sharing with, other cultures they silently admit it to be.

In later periods, the preoccupation with cultural origins was translated into an attempt to find out whether the Bible was influenced by Greek literature, or vice versa. In the seventeenth century, for example, the Dutch scholar Hugo Grotius argued that Greek poetry was influenced, among other things, by the Song of Solomon.¹³ About a century later, in 1777, Johann Theophilus Lessing (1732–1808) followed suit by publishing *Eclogae regis Salomonis*. Conversely, one of the first modern Jewish historians, Zvi Heinrich Graetz (1817–1891), tried

10 This is reminiscent of the Christian supersessionism or replacement theology designed to explain how the Christians, or Israel of the Spirit, inherited the Jews, or Israel of the Flesh. This idea already appears in the New Testament, but it is St. Justin Martyr who imposed on this substitution the categorical distinction between flesh and spirit. He thereby laid the groundwork for that theology, which lies at the heart of Christianity’s self-definition vis-à-vis Judaism. See Pelikan (1971), vol. 1; Ruether (1974), chapter 3; Simon (1986) [1948]; Ticotsky (2018).

11 This legend is told by the fourteenth-century Rabbi Meir Ben Isaac Aldabi [מאיר אבן אלדבי] (c.1310–c. 1360), in his *Paths of Faith* [שבילי אמונה]. One of the greatest Jewish poets of the Hebrew Golden Age of Spain, Rabbi Judah Halevi [יהודה הלוי] (1075–1141) also argued that Greek wisdom originated in the Children of Israel. See Shavit (1997), 424 and 427–9; Shavit 2006.

12 Shavit (1997), 66–78. Here, Shavit borrowed an expression coined by Norman Roth, “Theft of Philosophy by the Greeks from the Jews” (ibid., 68; see Roth (1978)). A modern expression of the same motif may be found in *Socrates’ Secret* [סודו של סוקרטס] (1955), a novel by the Hebrew writer Avigdor Hame’iri [אביגדור המאירי] (1890–1970). See also Bar Kochva (2008).

13 That period also saw the publication of a book by the English scholar Zachary Bogan (1625–1659), who sought to map all parallels between the Homeric corpus and the Old and New Testaments. See Bogan (1658).

to refute their claims and prove the opposite: that the Biblical author of the Song of Songs borrowed ideas and phrases from the idylls of the Greek poet of the third century BCE Theocritus.¹⁴

This academic debate was telling: in a certain sense, it replaced the inter-religious polemics on the question of the “original” and therefore “correct” religion (and consequently, culture), that raged at first between Jews and Greeks, and later among Jews, Christians, and Muslims. It was no coincidence that the polemic battleground was the Song of Songs, as it was precisely then, in 1778, that Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803) published his translation and interpretation of the Song of Solomon, igniting a hermeneutic revolution by seeking to read the Biblical text literally, rather than allegorically, as a universal (albeit “Oriental”), secular love song rather than as a religious text.¹⁵ In the background of these developments were the academization and secularization of theological discourse as represented by the rise of scientific philology; the rise of modern nationalism, concurrently with the rise of Romanticism; and the legal and cultural emancipation of the German Jewry, which spawned – among many other remarkable achievements – the new discipline called *Wissenschaft des Judentums* (Judaic Studies): analytic and objective research of Jewish history by modern Jews, which laid the groundwork for Jewish studies as we know them today.

2 The Turn-of-the-Century Drama of Renewed Cultural Encounter and Shaul Tchernichovsky’s “Before the Statue of Apollo”

The second half of the nineteenth century represents a formative and particularly vibrant period in the relations between the Jews and the European nations among which they lived. Starting with the French Revolution, the emancipation of the Jews stimulated modernization processes at the expense of a weakening traditional community, growing secularization and integration

14 See Graetz (1871), 68–9, where one may also find details about important studies that preceded Graetz’s. For more on this polemic, see Kaminka (1930), 12–20. Also worthy of mention is the French scholar Victor Bérard’s study of the *Odyssey* (1931), which argues, among other things, that the Homeric Epic is rooted in ancient Hebrew sources. Of modern approaches, that represented by Cyrus Herzl Gordon (1908–2001) must be mentioned (albeit problematic in its own right), according to which both the Bible and ancient Greek literature share a common source – the ancient civilizations of the East, including the Mesopotamian *Epic of Gilgamesh*, among others; see Gordon (1965), 218–77.

15 Pardes (2013), 30–5.

in the general population, and the growth of an intelligentsia and liberal bourgeoisie with strong assimilationist tendencies.

For many European scholars the Jews' "return to history" and the development of a modern European self-awareness constituted fertile ground for the scientific, or rather pseudo-scientific, obsession with race theories and with the examination of the purported contribution of each of the ancient civilizations to the legacy of European culture – supposedly from an objective point of view but actually under the influence of the *Zeitgeist* that also gave birth to modern anti-Semitism. One of these scholars, the French historian and philosopher Ernest Renan (1823–1892), opens his voluminous *History of the People of Israel* [Histoire du peuple d'Israël] with these words:

For a philosophic mind, that is to say for one engrossed in the origin of things, there are not more than three histories of real interest in the past of humanity: Greek history, the history of Israel, and Roman history. These three histories combined constitute what may be called the history of civilisation, civilisation being the result of the alternate collaboration of Greece, Judea, and Rome.¹⁶

As much as it sought to remove the barrier between the competing cultures and emphasize their commonalities, this statement was motivated by Renan's tendency to blur the relation between the ancient Israelites and modern-day Jews.¹⁷

As opposed to this (purportedly) inclusive tendency, the poet Heinrich Heine (1797–1856) and the intellectual Moses Hess (1812–1875), one of the fathers of European socialism and one of the precursors of Zionism (he was called the "communist rabbi"), expressed an approach Shavit calls a "pattern of antinomy." Shavit explains about Heine, who, like Hess, was born to Jewish parents in the Rhineland:

Heine found in Hebraism and Hellenism two faces of Western civilization, two universal categories: the ascetic spiritualism of the Jews in contrast to the glorification of life and the sensuality of the Hellenes. [...] on the one hand Heine became in the following years a symbol embodying the conception of the idealistic, unequivocal dualism endorsed by so many after him, on the other he personified the inner struggle and the spiritual and cultural qualms of a broader public, its perception that

16 Renan (1888), vii.

17 Shavit (1997), 55.

Hellenism and Judaism interacted, contended, and became reconciled, creating a perpetual tension and constant dynamic even when one overpowered the other.¹⁸

One generation after Heine, Hess also contrasted the two cultures in his book *Rome and Jerusalem: The Last Nationality Question* [Rom und Jerusalem, die letzte Nationalitätenfrage] (1862). But whereas for Heine the pattern of antinomy was designed to crack the code of Western civilization and mark himself, the German Jew, as part and parcel thereof, Hess applied the same pattern to achieve a different end: charting a political horizon for the Jews beyond Europe through the renewal of their sovereignty in the Promised Land.

European Jews used various terms to refer to the acculturation they experienced in those years, including the phrase “the beauty of Japheth in the Tents of Shem” [יְפֶתֹוּ שֵׁם בְּאוֹהֶלֶי שֵׁם].¹⁹ This phrase is common in the literature of the Jewish Enlightenment or *Haskalah* [השכלה], which began in the late eighteenth century, that is, roughly, fifty to one hundred years after the onset of the European Enlightenment. The phrase is derived from the Biblical verse “May God enlarge Japheth and let him dwell in the tents of Shem” [יִפְתָּ אֱלֹהִים לְיִפְתָּ וְיָשֹׁבֶן בְּאוֹהֶלֶי שֵׁם] (Gen. 9:27)²⁰ – part of Noah’s blessing upon his two sons, Japheth and Shem, who did not see his nakedness when he became drunk. Given the typological identification of Shem as the father of the Israelites and Japheth as the father of the Europeans and Westerners, the phrase “the beauty of Japheth in the tents of Shem” alluded to the borrowing of European cultural elements, then considered universal, by the Jewish world. As much as it highlighted the gap between the two cultures, the phrase also indicated their ancient kinship relation, and conveyed a positive and optimistic message. Conversely, the expression “an alien grapevine in the vineyard of Israel” [זֶמְרָה זָרָה בְּכַרְם יִשְׂרָאֵל] conveyed a negative message, alerting to the danger lurking in the introduction of foreign and even destructive elements into Jewish culture. Both expressions reflect the sentiments of both fascination and fear that characterized the Jews’ contact with European civilization, as yet another manifestation of the aforementioned tension between separationist and universalist trends in Jewish religion and culture.

This brings us to one of the foundational moments of modern Hebrew literature, in 1899, when Shaul Tchernichovsky [שְׂאוּל טְשֶׁרְנִיחֹוּבְסְקִי] (1875–1943)

18 Shavit (1997) 41, 44–5.

19 In the original Hebrew verse, “Beauty” [יְפִיּוּתוֹ] may also denote enlarging one’s territory and borders expansion.

20 All Biblical translations herein are from the English Standard Version (ESV).

composed the poem “Before the Statue of Apollo” [לְנוֹכַח פֶּסֶל אַפּוֹלוֹן], which was to attain iconic status in modern Hebrew culture. Together with Hayim Nahman Bialik [חיים נחמן ביאליק] (1873–1934), who was also born in the Russian Empire in the 1870s, Tchernichovsky is considered a founding father of modern Hebrew poetry, not least thanks to this poem. Born in 1875 in the Crimea, he immigrated to Palestine in 1931 and died in Tel Aviv in 1943. In terms of his *Weltanschauung*, however, he may be considered kin to the Romantic generation of the turn of the nineteenth century, next to Byron, Goethe, Hölderlin, and Schiller.²¹ The poem “Before the Statue of Apollo” was written when Tchernichovsky was a medical student at Heidelberg, and it was soon to be regarded as a poem that heralded a new chapter in the history of the relations between modern Hebrew and Western cultures.

This programmatic poem was highly audacious in its time and was even interpreted by Tchernichovsky's contemporaries as heretical. The speaker's fascination with the statue is very foreign to the spirit of traditional Judaism, which to this day follows the Second Commandment that prohibits the making of graven images.²² In the Bible, a statue is the likeness of a deity designed for idolatry, categorically opposed to the worship of the single God. Accordingly, the Jewish prohibition against worshipping a statue, which is tantamount to idolatry, is interpreted as mandating martyrdom, if it is necessary to avoid its violation (as in the story of the Woman with Seven Sons).²³ Note that the Hebrew word for “statue” (pesel [פֶּסֶל]) sounds like the adjective “invalid, improper” (pasul [פָּסוּל]), but it is not clear whether the two words are etymologically related.

21 Bronovsky (2006), 101. This is in keeping with the twisted, melting mechanism of the clock of modern Hebrew literature discussed at the beginning of this chapter.

22 “You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or serve them” (Ex. 20: 3–4).

23 According to this story, during the Hellenistic Greek occupation of Palestine, the men of King Antiochus IV Epiphanes captured a Jewish woman and her seven sons and demanded that they worship an idol and eat pork. One after the other the sons refused and were viciously executed in front of their mother. To her youngest, she said: “My son, go to your father Abraham and tell him: Thus said my mother. Feel not proud of yourself and say that I built an altar and placed my son, Isaac, upon it, for my mother built seven altars and put seven sons upon them in one day. For you it was a trial, for me it was reality” (Midrash Eichah Rabbah, parshata 50). She then committed suicide. This story is therefore a feminine and much more terrible version of the Binding of Isaac story. Note that the woman and her seven sons were recognized as martyrs by the Catholic and Orthodox Churches.

As much as Tchernichovsky appears to break a taboo by admiring the statue, he is equally careful not to cross the threshold:

בְּאֶתִי עֲדִידָה, אֶל נִשְׁכַּח מְעוֹלָם,

[...]

בְּאֶתִי עֲדִידָה, – הֲאֵם הִכְרַתְנִי?

הִנְנִי הַיְּהוּדִי: רִיב לָנוּ לְעוֹלָמִים! ...

[...]

עֵינֶיךָ הִרְוָאָה בִּי! יַעַן הִרְחַקְתִּי

לְכַת מִכָּל אֲשֶׁר הָיוּ לִפְנֵי

וְאַחֲרֵי בְּנֵי תֵּיב אָדָם בֵּן תְּמוּתָהּ, –

הִנְנִי הֶרְאֵשׁוֹן לְשָׁבִים אֵלֶיךָ,

[...]

זֶקֶן הָעָם – אֵלֶּהִיו זֶקְנֵנוּ עַמּוֹ!

[...]

וְאָבּוֹא אֵלֶיךָ.

בְּאֶתִי עֲדִידָה. מוֹל פֶּסֶלְךָ אֶקְדָּה.

פֶּסֶלְךָ – סִמָּל הַמָּאוֹר בְּחַיִּים;

אֶקְדָּה, אֶכְרַעָה לְטוֹב וְלַנְּעִלָה,

לְאֲשֶׁר הוּא נִשְׂא בְּמִלּוֹא כָּל הָעוֹלָם,

לְאֲשֶׁר הוּא נִהְדָּר בְּמִלּוֹא כָּל הַבְּרִיאָה,

לְאֲשֶׁר יֵשׁ מְרוֹמָם בְּסוּד־סוּדוֹת הַיְצִירָה.

אֶכְרַע לַחַיִּים, לַגְּבוּרָה וְלִיָּפִי,

אֶכְרַע לְכָל שְׂכִיזֵת הַחֲמֻדָּה, שֶׁשֶּׁדְּדוּ

פְּגָרֵי אֲנָשִׁים וְרָקֵב זָרַע אָדָם,

מִזְרֵי הַחַיִּים מִיַּד צוּרֵי שָׂדֵי,

אֶל אֱלֹהֵי מַדְבָּרוֹת הַפֶּלִי,

אֶל אֱלֹהֵי כּוֹבֵשֵׁי כְּנָעַן בְּסוּפָהּ, –

וַיֵּאֱסְרוּהוּ בְּרִצְעוֹת שֶׁל תְּפִלִּין...

[I come before thee, O long forgotten God,

[...]

I come before thee – Dost thou recognize me?

Here I am – a Jew. Our quarrel is of old!

[...]

Thine eye sees me and is astonished.

Yes, I have come further than all before me,

And after me on the road wanders man so mortal.

Behold, I am the first of those who return unto thee

[...]

My nation is grown old and its God old with it,
 [...]

 So I come to thee.

 I come to thee and before thy statue I bow my head.

 Thy statue – it's a symbol of the light in life.

 I bow my head, I kneel to the good and sublime,

 To everything exalted in the world so full.

 To all things glorious in the universe so rich,

 To the sublimest mysteries of creation,

 I bend the knee to life, strength, and beauty.

 I bend the knee to all those treasures of delight

 Which lifeless men, the seed corrupt of man,

 The repressors of life, stole from the hand of my Rock, the Almighty,

 The Lord God of the wonderous deserts,

 The Lord God of those who conquered Canaan by storm –

 But they bound him up in the straps of Tefillin.]²⁴

The speaker does not kneel in front of the statue but only bows to it. He kneels down – not to the statue itself, but to the properties it represents. Even the obvious criticism of rabbinical Judaism for binding “The Lord God of those who conquered Canaan by storm” in *tefillin* [תפילין] straps – condemning the conceptualization of Judaism as a single continuum, from the Bible to the present – is not an attack on the essence of Judaism. In fact, the speaker presents himself as a kind of Jewish representative of his generation: precisely because of his Jewishness, he, perhaps more than his Christian European contemporaries, is “the first of those who return unto thee,” the first to remember a “long forgotten God.” This means that the fracture between Hebraism and Hellenism is to become the bridge between them: it is the Jew, whose Canaanite past has been forgotten, who will remind the world of the Hellenic past long gone (perhaps due to the rise of Christianity), and vice versa: the Hellenic past will remind the Jew of his indigenous, Canaanite past.

What we have here, therefore, is a new level of interpreting the concept of “the beauty of Japheth in the tents of Shem,” which expands it immeasurably:

24 Translated by Bernard Braham (Tchernichovsky 1964 [1899]). Canaan is the ancient name of the Land of Israel, prior to its occupation by the Children of Israel. The *tefillin* (phylacteries) are a set of Jewish ceremonial objects made of parchment and leather straps. A devout Jew “lays the *tefillin*” (ties himself with the leather straps attached to the parchment) every morning. These two signifiers therefore allude to completely different periods in Jewish history: Canaan refers to an ancient period before the Israelites became a nation and the *tefillin* to a custom adopted much later, in the rabbinical period.

for the modern Jew, Western civilization is no longer a decoration or a seasoning but a panacea. In this sense, Tchernichovsky's thought is rooted in the ideal of the Renaissance men and of the Romantics, who viewed the revival of classical culture as a two-way street: reconstructing the past that is essential for promoting modernity and the resurgence of nationalism (Renan wrote about the "cultural renaissance" as a political lever for crystallizing a national consciousness).²⁵

The speaker is both young and old. He has "come further than all before" him and is a member of an "old" nation, but he chooses life and youth, "So I come to thee." However, although it is admired by the speaker as a model of life and vitality, the statue is static and silent. It is the speaker who is dynamic, it is he who chooses to approach and talk to the statue, and it is in his power to carry out the cultural and perhaps also the self-transformation he envisages. Apollo, the god of sun, the light, music, and beauty remains no more than a statue – one of many copies of the Apollo Belvedere, which had found its way to the University of Heidelberg.²⁶ It is the Jewish medical student (then in his first year at the University of Heidelberg) who breathed life into the statue (which also represents the god of medicine), in the spirit of the German Romantic, perhaps also Nietzschean, adoration of Hellenism. Note that this student came from Eastern Europe (the poem bears the indication "Odessa-Heidelberg, 1899"). See how many Easts we have here: Eastern Europe, where Tchernichovsky was born; one ancient East, partly imagined: Hellenic civilization, from the German point of view, as Johann Joachim Winckelmann (1717–1768) described it in his *History of Art of Antiquity* [Geschichte der Kunst des Altertums] (1764), in which the Apollo Belvedere was described as representing the perfection of the Greek ideal; yet another ancient East, also partly imagined: Canaanite, Hebrew-indigenous civilization. And yet another East: the contemporary Middle East, the target of the Zionist vision which was becoming a reality in those very years (the First Zionist Congress was held in Basel two years earlier, in 1897). All those four Easts are connected through a single West: that of German Romanticism.

25 For more on the poem in its broad Jewish and Zionist contexts, see Holtzman (1999), 64–6, 127–9. Holtzman provides a detailed description of Berdyczewski's influence on Tchernichovsky (see above, p. 298 n. 2).

26 The original marble statue (itself a Roman copy of a lost bronze original from the fourth century BCE), is now presented in the Vatican Museum; see Shavit and Shavit (2009)). Due to space limitations, I have not elaborated on the poem's homoerotic or autoerotic overtones. On the choice of Apollo, rather than Dionysus, for instance, as the hallmark of Hellenism, see Sha'anani (1984), 127–9).

Tchernichovsky's "Before the Statue of Apollo," together with his gigantic translation project – among other things, he translated the complete *Iliad* and *Odyssey* into Hebrew with exceptional artistry, using a counterpart of the Homeric dactylic hexameter throughout – marked him as *the* "Greek" and "heathen" poet of modern Hebrew literature.²⁷ As such, he was clearly contrasted by his contemporaries with Bialik: the latter was seen as the "national poet," the voice of Zionist revival, while Tchernichovsky was deemed the "universal poet." Tchernichovsky's "foreignness" played a dual and contradictory role in setting the boundaries of modern Hebrew literature, while, at the same time, viewing it as a "natural" outgrowth of European literature.

The poem "Before the Statue of Apollo" has a unique status in Hebrew culture also because it is probably the first *ekphrastic* poem in modern Hebrew literature "not only from the chronological aspect, but also from the substantive, conceptual aspect," as Avner Holtzman remarks.²⁸ In that, Tchernichovsky paved a path hitherto blocked by Hebrew culture's traditional aversion to plastic arts, owing to the aforementioned Biblical prohibition against the graven image, which had led to actual iconophobia (note in this regard the stereotypical dichotomy that views Judaism as an oral/aural culture as opposed to Hellenism as a visual culture).²⁹ In many respects, this poem represents the Big Bang of modern Hebrew poetry, in that it reformulated the relations of Hebrew (not necessarily Jewish) culture with Hellenic culture on an equal basis, out of profound awareness of the residues of the past, but without becoming subjugated to them and with optimistic emphasis on their shared human platform.

3 Normalization by Way of Neutralization: Jacob Fichman's "On Reading Homer"

The trail blazed by Tchernichovsky enabled his contemporary Jacob Fichman [יעקב פִּיכְמָן] (1881–1958) to write in 1907, at the age of 26 and about a decade after Tchernichovsky's "Before the Statue of Apollo," the poem "On Reading

27 As Dykman ((1994), 426) writes, translating the Homeric epics was a lifetime mission for Tchernichovsky, preoccupying him probably from 1917 until 1942, a year before his death. On the prosodic forms used by Tchernichovsky, see Dykman (2000), 23–6. For more on Tchernichovsky and the translation of classical antiquity, see Schulte (2013). On the reception of the dactylic hexameter in modern Hebrew literature more generally, see Dykman (2007). For a 1913 translation of book 9 of the *Iliad* into Yiddish by Max Weinreich, see Moss (2007), 203–4.

28 Holtzman (1999), 127, 129.

29 See, e.g., Shavit (1997), 199–201.

Homer." Born in 1881 in Bessarabia (today Moldova), Fichman was active in the major hubs of modern Hebrew literature in Eastern Europe until he settled in Tel Aviv in 1919, where he died in 1958. In the poem the speaker presents the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* as life-changing texts and as sources of inspiration for self-revival:

[...]
 עָרַב עָרַב אֲנִי קוֹרֵא – וּבִלְבָבִי
 דְּבַר־מָה חֶזֶק, רַעְנָן נְעוֹר וּמִתְרַמֵּם,
 דְּבַר־מָה גָדֹל בִּי וְרַב בְּטַחוּנוֹ; וְכִמוֹ נִפְתַּח פְּתָאם שְׁכָר נַעֲלָם
 שִׁירַת חַי חֶדֶד חֶדְדָה מִמִּסְגָּרָה,
 אֲנִי מִקְשִׁיב אֶל הַקּוֹלוֹת וּבִרְעָדָה, –
 אֲכֹן יֵשׁ עוֹד מָה בְּאָרֶץ וְאֲנִכִּי לֹא יֵדְעָתִי.
 [...]

[[...]
 Night after night I read – and deep within my heart
 Something powerful, fresh, awakens and ascends,
 Something waxes confident within me; like a hidden dam has suddenly
 burst
 From captivity, the music of my life did flee,
 To the sounds I lend my ear and with a shudder –
 Forsooth there's something else out there in the world and I never knew.
 [...]].

This is less of a declarative-national and more of a personal poem: while the speaker in Tchernichovsky's poem presents himself as the representative of the Hebrew nation standing in front of the emissary of Hellenism (and this standing is physical, in space, facing the statue), with Fichman the situation is far more intimate – it is the encounter of a reader with a literary work, by himself, perhaps in a private space. For Fichman's poem there is no need either to state the polarization between the two cultures or to declare their symbiosis that is apparently the order of the day, as in Tchernichovsky's poem. In the very act of reading, the poem enacts that symbiosis. For the speaker of the poem, that is, a Hebrew reader of Homer, the alienness of Hellenic texts no longer carries any national-cultural significance; it is the product of the temporal gap which separates by necessity a modern reader from an ancient text. For the modern Hebrew reader, the ancient Greek work spells, as he puts it in the poem, the "vision of alien, wild life," the experiences of a life that as much as it differs from his, still there is something in it that can be recognized as familiar, as

rising from the depths of his soul. In that, the Hebrew reader was no different from any European reader of his time, or perhaps of an earlier time, especially if he was of a Romantic bent. Suffice it only to mention the sonnet “On First Looking into Chapman’s Homer” by John Keats (1795–1821) about the discovery by the English speaker of a new world through reading the translation of the Homeric epics by the Elizabethan poet George Chapman (1559–1634).³⁰

At first glance, Fichman’s poem may look pale in comparison with Tchernichovsky’s. On the face of it, it makes no public case; and certainly, it did not gain central status in the modern Hebrew poetic canon. But therein precisely lies its importance, namely in being low-key and emphasizing the quotidian, personal, and all-human experience, as opposed to the national, cultural, and historical drama foregrounded in “Before the Statue of Apollo.” In that way Fichman’s poem charted a path that was perhaps no less important: “normalization” of the Graeco-Roman cultures in Hebrew culture by neutralizing the intercultural clashes. Now it became possible to interweave motifs and characters from these cultures organically and non-apologetically, without placing ideology at the foreground of the poem. (Note, however, that this move necessarily had implicit ideological meanings, in presenting, for example, modern Hebrew literature as part and parcel of European literature, by pointing to the similarities between the Jewish and classical legacies and the contribution made by both to the formation of Western civilization). Fichman’s marginality – he was considered from the very start an “impressionist” poet enclosed in his world, who avoided representing contemporary reality – was victorious here, since it facilitated a more natural assimilation of the Graeco-Roman classical elements in modern Hebrew poetry, and in a certain sense foreshadowed its future path, emphasizing the existential and hence universal elements in motifs borrowed from the Graeco-Roman tradition.

In his pioneering book on the mutual images of Jews and Christians, Yuval wrote that we [that is, modern, secular people] are currently in a post-polemical and post-apologetic age, that enables us to examine intercultural conflicts in a more objective light, to heighten ourselves, so to speak, above “the shoulders of the previous generation,” as we “can see the *other* side [...] better than

30 The Homeric epics were only fully translated into Hebrew some thirty years later, by Tchernichovsky (see above). By the time Fichman published his poem, there were only a few, and very partial, Hebrew translations of the Homeric works (Dykman (1994), 469; Cohen (2018)). Fichman probably became acquainted with the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* in Russian or German translations. About a decade after publishing this poem, he helped Tchernichovsky edit his translation of Anacreon’s poems. For this translation, see Rosenmeyer (2014). On Keats’s sonnet, see also Tambakaki, this volume, and Yeh, this volume.

they could.”³¹ Accordingly, we can say that Fichman’s poem heralded a new age in the relations of Hebrew culture with Graeco-Roman civilization – a post-polemical and post-apologetic one. This age is inseparably related to the “return of the Jews to history” – the crystallization of secular and modern Hebrew-Jewish consciousness, and subsequently, with the advent of Zionism, of national self-determination as well.

Fichman’s poem is included in his first book, *Stalks* [גבעולים], published in Warsaw in 1911. At that time, the Polish city was one of the major hubs of modern Hebrew literature, second only to Odessa, while Tel Aviv – where Fichman would later settle – was only two years old and, like the rest of Palestine, was still under Ottoman rule. After the First World War, the centers of Hebrew literature moved from Eastern Europe to Vienna, Berlin, New York, and mainly the Land of Israel, which would supersede them all with the growth and prosperity of the Jewish settler community under the British Mandate. Curiously, hardly any Hebrew poems dealing directly with Graeco-Roman mythology were written in the interwar period (an exception that proves the rule is *Anacreon on the Pole of Sorrow* [אנקראון על קוטב העצבון] by Uri Zvi Greenberg [אורי צבי גרינברג] (1894–1981), published in Tel Aviv in 1928).³² Perhaps Tchernichovsky’s translations and some of his poems provided the Hebrew literary system with the classicist element it had lacked; perhaps the tumultuous historical events of later years prevented the proverbial Hebrew dam from being opened to foreign texts.

4 Odysseus and the Second World War – A Moment of Shared Destiny: Lea Goldberg’s “The Lament of Odysseus”

In late May 1945, some three weeks after Germany’s surrender in the Second World War, Lea Goldberg [לאה גולדברג] (1911–1970), the leading Hebrew female poet of her time, published the poem “The Lament of Odysseus” [קִינַת אוֹדִיסֵאוֹס]. Goldberg was born in Königsberg, East Prussia, and before immigrating to Mandatory Palestine in 1935, she lived in Russia and studied at the universities of Kovno, Bonn, and Berlin. She died in Jerusalem in 1970. In a certain sense, she inherited Tchernichovsky’s place in modern Hebrew literature as a representative of *Weltliteratur*, a master of sonnets and a prolific translator, and like him she travelled from Eastern Europe through German universities

31 Yuval (2006), 21; emphasis added.

32 See Rosenmeyer (2014), 228.

to Palestine. In "The Lament of Odysseus" she combined the Bible and the *Odyssey* in an unprecedented way.

"The Lament of Odysseus" is probably the first modern Hebrew poem by a female poet that borrows elements from the Graeco-Roman classical tradition.³³ In it, Goldberg rewrites the Homeric epics. For, unlike in the *Odyssey*, where Odysseus travels to the Underworld to seek advice from the Prophet Tiresias, in Goldberg's poem Odysseus is "old" and comes to "pay respects." "The Lament of Odysseus" opens as follows:

שבע נְדוּדִים יָרַד אֹדִיסֵאוּס הַשָּׁב שְׂאוּלָה
לְדָרֵשׁ בְּשָׁלוֹם יְדִידִים הָרוּגִים לְפִי חֶרֶב.
צִלְלֵי רַעִים חֲלָלִים בִּרְכוּהוּ בְּשַׁעֲרֵי,
זַעֲקַת מוֹתָם וּבְכֵיָם אֶזְנֵנִי זֹכֶרֶת –
אֵידָךְ נָפְלוּ גִבּוֹרִים!

[Sated with wandering, old Odysseus descended to the Underworld
to pay his respects to friends killed by the sword.
The shadows of slain comrades greeted him at the gate,
their weeping and death cries resounding in his ears –
How the mighty have fallen!]³⁴

The last line is repeated in the following stanzas of the poem, a refrain conveyed partly by the speaker, partly by Odysseus himself. "How the mighty have fallen!" is half of a phrase from one of the best-known laments in the Hebrew Bible: David's elegy about King Saul and his son Jonathan, who died in the battle with the Philistines on Mount Gilboa.³⁵ The battle scene described in the poem is also replete with Homeric and Biblical allusions. For example, we read the following lines:

אִישׁ וְסוֹסוֹ נָפְלוּ בַשָּׂדֶה הַקָּטָן.
דָּם בְּהֶמָּה וְאָדָם – פִּלְגֵי שְׁחוֹר נִשְׁפָּכוּ.
[...] אִוִּי לַעֲיִנַּיִם קִמּוֹת לְקִרְאַת הַקְּוִיָּת,
אִוִּי לְשִׁפְתַּיִם אֶלְמוֹת – "הַשְׁקוּנִי מִיָּם!"

33 Shacham (2001), 30.

34 Translated by Rachel Tzvia Back (with a minor change; Goldberg (2005) [1945], 73).

35 Goldberg omitted the first part of the opening verse of the lament, which grounds it in a national context: "Your glory, O Israel, is slain on your high places! How the mighty have fallen!" [הַעֲבִי יִשְׂרָאֵל עַל בָּמוֹתָיִךְ חָלַל אֵידָךְ נָפְלוּ גִבּוֹרִים] (2 Samuel 1:19).

[Men and their steed fell in the killing fields
 The blood of beast and man – black rivers flowing.
 [...] Woe to eyes blind in the face of death,
 woe to mute lips – “Give me water!”]

One can bring to mind “the horse and his rider” [סוס וְרִכְבוֹ] from the Song of Moses;³⁶ the Homeric phrase “the black death fell on men’s eyes” (e.g., τὸν δὲ κατ’ ὀφθαλμῶν ἐρεβεννὴ νύξ ἐκάλυψε); and Sisera’s request to Jael: “give me a little water to drink” [הַשְׁקִינִי נָא מֵעֵט מַיִם].³⁷ At the same time, the scene is also reminiscent of the recent battles of the Second World War (one has only to recall the Polish horsemen charging the German tanks on the very first day of the war, September 1, 1939). Goldberg thus created an exceptional amalgamation of ancient Hebraic and Hellenic elements, in which the *Odyssey* and David’s elegy are combined with the horrors of the recent war.³⁸

אֶת סְלִיחַתְכֶם בְּקֶשׁ בְּאֵתִי שְׂאוּלָה,
 [...]
 אוֹת הַקְּלוֹן עַל מִצְחִי מוֹתוֹ שֶׁל רַע,
 אוֹת הַקְּלוֹן עַל מִצְחִי חַיִּי מִנְגָּד,
 קוֹל זַעֲקַת מוֹתְכֶם אֲזִי זוֹכֶרֶת.
 אֵיד נִפְּלוּ גִבּוֹרִים!

[I have come to this hell to ask for your pardon
 [...]
 The death of a comrade is Cain’s mark on my forehead.
 My far-away life is Cain’s mark on my forehead.
 Your death cries resound in my ears.
 How the mighty have fallen!]

In the poem, the amalgamation of ancient Hebraic and Hellenic elements is also formal: the poem is written in the dactylic rhythm, derived from the ancient Greek epic meter, at the same time recalling the Biblical prosody,

36 Exodus 15: 1, 19. See also Jeremiah 51: 21; and Zechariah 12: 4.

37 Judges 4: 19. Note that those very words are used by Abraham’s servant when addressing Rebekah (Genesis 24: 43). For Homer, see, e.g., *Il.* 5.659.

38 Tchernichovsky and previous Hebrew translators of the Homeric epics had also used the amalgamation technique, combining Biblical with Greek elements, but it was he who refined it into a veritable art form (see, for example, Rosenmeier (2014)).

among other things in its multiple parallelisms (between the stanzas, between the lines and even within them, between the hemistichs).³⁹

A parallel movement on two levels is evident in the poem: between the third person and ancient past, on the one hand, and the first person and the present, on the other. This is a movement between a distant description of the combat and a state of intense emotion, perhaps felt by Odysseus and perhaps by the speaker, which is absent from both epics, the Hebraic and the Hellenic alike – the survivor's pangs of conscience for having survived while his loved ones have died. Goldberg said in a 1961 interview:

I wrote the poem ["The Lament of Odysseus"] during the war and I wanted to express the encounter with the dead, the encounter of a person who bears the burden of guilt for having stayed alive [...] It is no coincidence that in this poem, I used an expression that has nothing to do with Greek poetry, that of the lament "How the mighty have fallen!" – one of the most dreadful lyrical exclamations in the Bible.⁴⁰

It may be argued that by travelling so far back to the past, Goldberg sought to rebuke the immorality of her own time from a safe distance.⁴¹ This move is also designed to disguise her own deep pain for her loved ones left behind in Europe to die in the Holocaust, while she lived in Mandatory Palestine, protected from the horrors of war. "For the snare is broken, blasted open, and we have escaped" [כִּי נִשְׁבֵּר, נִפָּץ הַפֶּחַ וְאַנְחָנוּ נִמְלָטָנוּ] we read in the poem. That statement, which sounds like a contemporary confession by the speaker, actually paraphrases Psalm 124: 7: "We have escaped like a bird from the snare of the fowlers; the snare is broken, and we have escaped" [נַפְשֵׁנוּ בְּצִפּוֹר נִמְלָטָה מִפֶּחַ יוֹקְשִׁים, הַפֶּחַ נִשְׁבֵּר וְאַנְחָנוּ נִמְלָטָנוּ]. Goldberg also used that same verse in an article published in late April 1945, about a month before publishing the poem, in which she

39 Yeglin (2002), 69–72.

40 Yardeni (1961), 130–1. Curiously, at the beginning of the war, Goldberg (2016 [1939], 399) considered that very same lament to be "the first or one of the first pacifist poems in the world." The possible discrepancy between these two perspectives suggests a difference between the way Goldberg perceived the war when it began (as a kind of replay of the First World War, hence her pacifist attitude) and her later perception, having found out about the full scale of the Holocaust.

41 Hebrew literature scholar Ofra Yeglin ((2002), 63) elaborates: "When [Goldberg] turns her narrative gaze away to the historical-literary case of Odysseus [...] she achieves [...] that same gap between the time of the plot and the time of its narration [...] also reminding the reader that unlike the place and time she describes, the *Odyssey* is governed by the moral law. And though it is a mythical world of deities, demigods and heroes, it is also a deeply humane world."

undertook poignant soul-searching vis-à-vis Europe and European civilization. The article was entitled “Your Europe” [אִירוּפָּה שְׁלָכֶם] and expounded the Jews’ fascination with European civilization and its humanistic heritage, their profound disappointments due to their recurring persecution, and at the same time, their inescapable love of Europe, out of their deep sense of belonging to it:

But I have seen you today, anguished Europe, your wounds, your blood, your terribly ugly visage. You stood before me, as you have never stood before. As the precious-most, as a beaten and injured child wallowing in his blood. And I wanted to kiss all your wounds. Again you seemed in my Jewish eyes as Jesus on the cross, a martyr – not a savior. No, not a savior: a gullible fool walking down the Way of Suffering. [...] *The snare is broken, and we have escaped.* Do we have the right to judge? Do we have the right to forget? [...] And we shall not forget you, the wounds of the lover and the wounds of the hater we will not forget. Until the day we die we will carry it within us, this immense hurt whose name is Europe, “your Europe,” “their Europe,” but apparently [...] not “our Europe,” even though we were hers, very much hers.⁴²

I have elaborated on this seminal article by Goldberg not only because it adds an important layer to the previous discussion on the relations of Jews and Western civilization, but also because it illustrates the unique significance of her poem “The Lament of Odysseus.” If the article stresses the gap between Jews and European civilization that goes back as far as the advent of Christianity, the poem offers a perfect synthesis of the two civilizations in their pre-Christian period; apparently it envisages taking them back to it, as a remedy for the terrible calamity of the war and the Holocaust – which is, according to this logic, the most extreme manifestation of Christian anti-Semitism.

In this sense, in “The Lament of Odysseus” Goldberg has articulated a *Weltanschauung* expressed around that same period by the German-Jewish philologist Erich Auerbach (1892–1957), in his famous 1946 book *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* [Mimesis: Dargestellte Wirklichkeit in der abendländischen Literatur] (it is reasonable to assume that the two were not aware of each other’s texts at that time). The chapter that opens *Mimesis*, entitled “Odysseus’ scar,” compares the representation of reality in the *Odyssey* to that in the Bible by juxtaposing the Binding of Isaac (Akedah [עֶקֶדַת יִצְחָק], Genesis 22) with the passage in Book 19 of the *Odyssey*, where

⁴² Goldberg (1945), emphasis added.

Eurycleia, the old servant who used to be Odysseus' wet-nurse, recognizes him by the scar on his thigh.⁴³ Auerbach argues that these are the two prototypes that gave birth to realism in European culture, as part of a broader move, at the background of the book, of an apologetics on the Judeo-Christian heritage of Western civilization. In that, Auerbach went against the Aryan philologists who sought to eliminate the Old Testament from German culture and Western civilization in general.⁴⁴

The Second World War and the Holocaust thus provided a deeper and at the same time tragic aspect of a shared destiny between the previously rival cultures, the Hebraic and the Hellenic. It appears that for Goldberg, much like many of her contemporaries, the atrocities of the recent war had lowered the walls separating the competing cultures. In the face of Fascism and Nazism, they must have been seen as belonging to the same threatened civilization. They both faced the barbarians – no longer in the ancient sense of savages of unintelligible speech, and by way of derivation, those alien to Greek and later also Roman culture – but in their modern sense: Fascism and totalitarianism. In this light, even a conservative Israeli critic such as Baruch Kurzweil read the canonical core of Hebrew prose – the writings of S. Y. Agnon [שמואל יוסף עגנון] (1888–1970) (who received the Nobel Prize in 1966), grounded, as most of them were, in Jewish community life in antebellum Eastern Europe viewed from a post-Holocaust perspective – as a modern rendering of the Homeric motif of “belated return.”⁴⁵ And Hebrew theater was finally ready to stage Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus* for the first time in the Habima National Theater in Tel Aviv in February 1947 under the direction of the English director Tyrone Guthrie. The translation used was that made by Tchernichovsky in 1929, with adaptations by the poet Avraham Shlonsky [אברהם שלונסקי] (1900–1973).⁴⁶

5 Israeli Poetry, Odysseus, and Orpheus: The Historical-Epic vs. the Personal-Metapoetic

Just as scholars disagree on when modern Hebrew literature began, they also debate whether *Israeli* literature, that created after the establishment of the State of Israel in May 1948, should be distinguished from Hebrew literature

43 Auerbach (2003) [1946], 3–23.

44 Zakai (2017), 94–5, 98–9; Dubnov (2018), 157.

45 Kurzweil (1966), 50–1; G. Shaked (1989), 70–2. Note that already in one of the first reviews of his work, Max Brod wrote about the twenty-one-year-old Agnon: “This is a new Homer” (Brod (1918), 1366). See also Bossak (1971); Geiger (2012).

46 For more on this production, see Yaari (2007) and Yaari (2018), 45–59.

or be considered its natural continuation. In either case, it is obvious that the renewal of Jewish sovereignty in the Land of Israel contributed to neutralizing the conflictual relation between Hebrew and Graeco-Roman cultures, just as it placed the relations between Judaism and Christianity on a different footing. This opened the path for putting emphasis on the existential and universal aspects of classical mythologies and downplaying their foreign elements – that is, “normalization by neutralization.” Indeed, Israeli literature produced several dozens of poems referring to Graeco-Roman culture,⁴⁷ a richness which stands in sharp contrast to the small number of poems from the pre-statehood period, as reviewed above. Most of these poems, representative of the new trend, were written from the mid-1950s onwards.

This new development is also connected with a transformation in Hebrew poetry during those years, with the rise of a poetic style promoted mainly by Nathan Zach [נחמן זך] (1930–2020), which prevailed in the Hebrew poetic scene. Zach was born in Berlin and immigrated to Palestine at the age of six. In one of his most famous poems, he wrote: “I am a cosmopolite” [אֲנִי אֶזְרָח הָעוֹלָם], and his style involved abandoning traditional forms in favor of free verse and emphasis on individual and daily experiences at the expense of the collective and celebratory, and adopting Anglo-American and German cultural models instead of the Russian ones that had hitherto dominated the scene. The turn of Israeli writers to Greece and Rome was thus further motivated by the importance of myth in the so-called “high Modernism.” Suffice it only to mention T. S. Eliot’s 1923 review “Ulysses, Order and Myth” about James Joyce’s *Ulysses* (1922) containing the famous phrase: “Instead of narrative method, we may now use the mythical method.”⁴⁸ In Joyce’s *Ulysses*, the main character (or modern Odysseus), Leopold Bloom, is a Dublin half-Jew. The “neutralization” of the conflictual charges in classical elements has thus been given an extra push, outside Hebrew culture.

Since not all Hebrew poems incorporating classical elements from the mid-1950s on can be reviewed here, I would like to suggest two main trends that characterize this corpus, noting that, as in every methodological classification, this too is organic and artificial at one and the same time.

The first trend characterizes a set of poems that put emphasis on the time gap between modern times, during which modern Hebrew poetry is written, and ancient times, as embodied in mythical figures. The poems of this category

47 For lists of such poems, see, e.g., Ben-Porat (1979); Spiegel (1989), 548–64; Tsedaqa (1993); Shacham (2001), 28–101. See also Silberschlag (1977) and a special issue of the Hebrew periodical *Orot* on contemporary Israeli works inspired by Homer (Nitzan (2008)).

48 Eliot (1975), 178.

stress the gap between worldviews. The mythic figures and scenes that feature in these poems are disrupted and distorted, suggesting the flawed nature of the present reality and the “decline of generations” [ירידת הדורות], a Jewish concept assuming the newer the more distant from, and more inferior to, the sources. These poems usually have an epic and historical tone, which transcends the writer’s individual experience. A primary example is the poem “Odysseus” [אודיסס] (1959) by Haim Gouri [חיים גורי] (Tel Aviv 1923–Jerusalem 2018):

ובשובו אל עיר מולדתו מֵצָא ים
וְדָגִים שׁוֹנִים וְעֵשֶׂב צָף עַל הַגָּלִים הָאֲטִיִּים
וְשֶׁמֶשׁ נִחְלָשׁת בְּשׁוּלֵי שָׁמַיִם.

טָעוֹת לְעוֹלָם חוֹזֵרֶת, אָמַר אוֹדִיסֵס בְּלִבּוֹ הָעֵיף
וְחָזַר עַד פְּרֶשֶׁת הַדְּרָכִים הַסְמוּכָה לְעִיר הַשְּׂכִנָּה,
לִמְצָא אֶת הַדֶּרֶךְ אֶל עִיר מוֹלְדָתוֹ שֶׁלֹּא הִיְתָה מִיָּם.

הַלֵּךְ עֵיף כְּחוֹלֶם וּמִתְגַּעְגֵּעַ מְאֹד
בֵּין אֲנָשִׁים שֶׁדִּבְּרוּ יוֹנִית אַחֲרָת.
הַמַּלִּים שֶׁנָּטַל עִמּוֹ כְּצִידָה לְדֶרֶךְ הַמַּסָּעוֹת, גָּוְעוּ בִּינְתֵימִים.

[...]

קָמוּ הַמַּבְגָּרִים וְנָטְלוּ אֶת הַיְלָדִים שֶׁעָמְדוּ סְבִיבוֹ בְּמַעְגָּל
וּמִשְׁכּוֹ אוֹתָם.
וְאוֹר אַחֵר אוֹר הַצֶּהִיב בְּבֵית אַחֵר בֵּית.

בָּא טַל וַיֵּרֶד עַל רֹאשׁוֹ.
בָּאָה רוּחַ וְנִשְׁקָה לְשִׁפְתָיו.
בָּאוּ מִיָּם וְשִׁטְפוּ רִגְלָיו כְּאֲבִירִקְלִיָּה הַזִּקְנָה
וְלֹא רָאוּ אֶת הַצִּלְקָת.
וְהַמְשִׁיכוּ בְּמוֹרֶד כְּדֶרֶךְ הַמַּיִם.

[And when he returned to his birthplace he found sea
And various fishes and grass floating on slow waves
And sun weakened in the rims of the sky.

An error forever recurs, said Odysseus in his tired heart,
And returned to the cross-roads close to the neighboring city
To find the road to his birthplace that was not water.

A wayfarer weary as a dreamer yearning much
 Between people who spoke another Greek.
 The words he had taken as provision for his travels had meanwhile
 perished.

[...]

The adults arose and took the children standing about him in a circle
 And drew them away.
 And light after light yellowed in house after house.

The dew came and fell upon his head.
 The wind came and kissed his lips.
 Water came and washed his feet like old Eurycleia.
 And it did not see the scar and continued down the slope like water.]⁴⁹

The phrase “people who spoke another Greek” is telling. Not only is it “realistic” or historically accurate (while in their written form most ancient Greek words can easily be recognized by a modern Greek as familiar, it is almost impossible for modern Greeks to communicate in ancient Greek), but it is also a wonderful metaphor for the difficulties of understanding between any two persons, let alone after one of them has just returned after twenty (read two thousand) years. In this alternative narrative of Odysseus’ return, the climax of the plot does not happen and the hero’s communication with the people of his homeland fails – he is only successful with elements of nature. The water is stronger than the scar, as the former embodies eternal nature while the latter is fleeting, and this is perhaps the only comfort available to the Greek hero.

Gouri was not the first to weave such an alternative plot. Already in 1795 – a century before his fellow Romantic Tchernichovsky – in another poem entitled “Odysseus,” Friedrich Schiller (1759–1805) demonstrated the disappointment awaiting the mythological hero in his renewed encounter with Ithaca, and by extension, the painful gap between the ideal and reality. What is new in Gouri’s poem is that he amalgamated Odysseus with Honi the Circle-Drawer [חוני המעגל] – a Talmudic mythical figure who is said to have fallen asleep and awakened after seventy years; the fact that nobody recognized him made him pray for death.⁵⁰ It may be that Gouri, known as the “Poet of the Palmach”

49 Translated by Ruth Finer Mintz (Gouri (1982) [1959]).

50 Honi the Circle-Drawer is better known for standing in a circle he drew in the dust around himself and refusing to move until the Lord sent rain. For more on the dialogue between

(a Jewish fighting force, later integrated into the Israel Defense Forces, which played a key role in Israel's War of Independence, 1947–1949), reacted in this poem to the reality of returning to the routine of everyday life after a heroic war. Perhaps the poem also encodes something of the poet's return from his 1953 studies at the Sorbonne. And he most probably was preoccupied with the Homeric hero's scar also thanks to Auerbach's book (see above), which was first published in Hebrew in late 1957 and was very influential in Israel.

While Goldberg's "The Lament of Odysseus" is a link in the transition away from the relatively highbrow speech of her contemporaries, and certainly of the previous literary generation (Bialik, Tchernichovsky, Fichman), Gouri's poetic style is clearly closer to actual speech. It has no fixed meter (although the last words in each stanza rhyme), and its overall organization is relatively flexible. In that Gouri followed the norms established by the young Hebrew poets of those years, despite being slightly older than most. The poem can therefore also be read as metapoetic: the Israeli war poet returns, but in his homeland poets have been writing differently, and therefore he and the heroic tone of his poems, and his image as a warrior, are no longer noticed.⁵¹

The second trend typical of that group of Hebrew poems inspired by classical mythology moves in the opposite direction: these poems bring the classical figures closer to the present, hence the myth is less distorted. They tend to focus on the personal and existential sphere and are usually interested in *ars poetica*. They therefore stretch a direct line between their time and the heroes of the past – usually Orpheus, who is regarded as the Father of Poets, given the tragic nature of poetic and musical creation his figure epitomizes. I will concentrate here only on the poem "David and Orpheus" [דוד ואורפיוס] by Shin Shalom (Shalom Yosef Shapira) [ש. שלום]. Shalom was born in Poland in 1904,

the poem and Honi's story, see Pagis ((2003) [1965], 160–2) and Shoham ((2006), 120–3). Another poem written by Gouri during that time, "You Are Not a King" [אינך מלך], also connotes Odysseus.

51 Odysseus is also the poetic protagonist of Gouri's contemporary and brother in arms, Natan Yonatan [נתן יונתן] (born in Kiev in 1923, immigrated with his parents at the age of two and died in Israel in 2004). In his poem "If Only We Could Live within the Sad Music" [לו נחיה בשירה הנוגה] the *Odyssey* is used to reflect on the poet's own personal experiences of battle and grief: Yonatan's Odysseus would rather continue traveling after his return to Ithaca. See Koplowitz-Breier (2012) for more on Yonatan's dialogue with Homeric works. Another aspect Yonatan extracts from mythology is Mediterranean locality whereby the distant past helped him crystallize Israeli-Jewish indigeneity. Tchernichovsky's own attraction to Greek civilization was largely due to the same reason: ancient Greek culture allowed him and his readers to imagine ancient Mediterranean Canaanite culture, supposedly emblematic of a glorious Israelite past, and by the same token the promise of a harmonious future with the neighbors in the region.

immigrated to Mandatory Palestine in 1922 and died in Israel in 1990.⁵² In the poem equal weight is given to the two ancient heroes from the Bible and Greek mythology as the writer's sources of inspiration: both David and Orpheus had the power to heal and save other people through the power of music: David, the King of Israel, Saul, and Orpheus his beloved Eurydice:

דָּוִד וְאֹרְפֵיאוֹס,
אֹרְפֵיאוֹס וְדָוִד
בְּמִיתָרֵי הַדְּרוֹכִים
מִהֶדְהֵדִים תָּמִיד.
[...]

[David and Orpheus,
Orpheus and David
Reverberate always
In my outstretched strings.
[...]]

The speaker of "David and Orpheus" considers himself the scion of both David and Orpheus; but he also stresses the difference he has from them in successes and failures. While David was saved twice from Saul's spear (1 Samuel 18: 10–1; 19: 9–10), the speaker is hit by it. And while Orpheus managed to flee, the speaker failed to save his lover from the underworld and left his heart behind:

אוֹלָם חֲנִיתוֹ שֶׁל שָׁאוּל הַמוֹטֶלֶת
לֹא הִכְתָּה בְּקִיר כִּי אִם בִּי,
וּבְהִקְיָמִי מִעֵפֶר הַיִּפְעָה הַנוֹפֶלֶת
הַשְּׁאֲרָתִי בְּשָׁאוּל אֶת לְבִי.
[...]

[Alas, the spear flung fast by Saul
Hit me instead, and not the wall
And as I raised from the dust the fallen splendor
I left my heart in the netherworld.
[...]]

52 Orpheus is also the theme of three poems by the poet Nathan Zach (see above): "Orpheus," "Orpheus Yells" and "Orpheus Turns His Head" [אורפֵיאוֹס מִפְּנֵה; אורפֵיאוֹס צוֹעֵק; אורפֵיאוֹס מִפְּנֵה]. Zach exploited the connection between the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice and the scene in the Sodom and Gomorrah episode: "But Lot's wife, behind him, looked back, and she became a pillar of salt" (Genesis 19:26). For this connection, see Bremmer (2008), Chapter 7 ("Don't Look Back: From the Wife of Lot to Orpheus and Eurydice").

The ancient stories from the two different cultures meet here through the Hebrew paronomasia between the name Saul (Shaul [שָׁאֹל]) and the Biblical word for Hades, the god of the netherworld (She'ol [שְׁאוֹל]), both written in the same way in Hebrew. Moreover, the Orphic moment in the poem is formulated with a clear Biblical allusion: "And as I raised from the dust." Here the speaker-Orpheus is akin to the Hebrew Lord: "He raises the poor from the dust and lifts the needy from the ash heap" [מְקִימֵי מַעְפֵּר דָּל, מֵאַשְׁפֹּת יְרִים אֲבִיּוֹן] (Psalm 113: 7).

6 Conclusion

Israeli literary scholar Aminadav Dykman characterized European literature after the heyday of Romanticism as inspired by three sources: the Bible, the Graeco-Roman classics, and popular traditions. "As opposed to these systems, double or triple," he writes, "our [Hebrew] poetry actually had a single system. The only development it underwent, in this regard, was the transition from the Bible and its multiple subjects and language onwards, to the post-Biblical Jewish literature, and to subjects borrowed carefully and in measured doses from non-Jewish sources."⁵³ These subjects, that is, the elements borrowed from Greek and Roman cultures, thus played a key role in the modernization of Hebrew culture, in its development and opening to the world. In a dual move, the Graeco-Roman elements helped both establish the universal (read European) identity of Hebrew culture and emphasize its Hebrew character and distinctiveness. Later on, as Hebrew literature took root in the Land of Israel, they might also have contributed to stressing its Mediterranean identity.

Even after their assimilation, however, Graeco-Roman elements remained alien to modern Hebrew poetry. True, today they no longer carry the threatening ideological charge attributed to them in the past and their use is no longer considered a subversive move on the part of Hebrew writers. They have undergone a neutralization process, related to the modernization of Hebrew literature, and are often used to represent an existential, universal, and supra-temporal experience. In this regard, Hebrew literature has aligned its clock with those of Western literatures, to return to the opening metaphor. But owing to the fact that they penetrated Hebrew literature at such a relatively late stage, Graeco-Roman elements did not occupy a central place in it, apart from their appearance in several canonical poems (most of which are mentioned above). Moreover, major Hebrew poets, including Bialik, Shlonsky, Nathan Alterman

53 Dykman (2004), 194.

[נתן אלתרמן] (1910–1970), and others, had no particular need for that resource in their poetry.

Another explanation for the non-centrality of Graeco-Roman elements in Hebrew poetry has to do with “software,” rather than “hardware,” so to speak. By this I mean that historically, Jewish sources, starting with the Bible, have been typically laconic, shedding little light and keeping much more in the dark, thus allowing considerable leeway for interpretations and gap-fillings, in ways that often undermine the source with astonishing creativity. Conversely, in the Homeric text, for example, the painstaking specification of realistic details leaves much less room for interpretive or creative imagination. Auerbach put it in these words: “the Homeric poems conceal nothing, they contain no teaching and no secret second meaning. Homer can be analyzed [...] but he cannot be interpreted. [...] It is all very different in the Biblical stories. [...] they require subtle investigation and interpretation, they demand them.”⁵⁴

In any examination of the reception of Graeco-Roman elements in modern Hebrew poetry more broadly, a comparison with the reception of the Old Testament and of Christian elements proves useful. About the former, Israeli literary scholar Malka Shaked concludes:

In the poetry written in the Revival period, in the Yishuv period, and on the eve of statehood,⁵⁵ the dominant tendency is to consecrate the Biblical myths and view the Biblical characters as role models, whereas in the poetry written after statehood, particularly in the last three decades, the dominant tendency is to critique the Bible, de-mythicize and parodize it, and particularly use it in order to shed a critical light on present life, and do so through parodic uses.⁵⁶

One might say that the same description can be applied to the use of Graeco-Roman elements in modern Hebrew poetry. However, owing to their relative marginality and basic foreignness to both writers and readers, and in particular owing to their belated entry into the literary system, those processes of wear and tear have operated on Graeco-Roman elements with significantly less intensity; they have hardly been parodied, for instance.

⁵⁴ Auerbach (2003), 8–11.

⁵⁵ In Hebrew literature, the Revival period stretches between the end of the *Haskalah* (see above, p. 304) and the beginning of the modernization of Hebrew and the establishment of the State of Israel (1881–1948). The Yishuv is the Jewish settler community in pre-statehood Palestine.

⁵⁶ M. Shaked (2005), 621.

As for the presence of Christian elements in modern Hebrew literature, Israeli literary scholar Ruth Kartun-Blum writes:

A reading of fifty years of Israeli poetry shows that the Christian narrative becomes a cultural sounding box wherein the politics of identity (and identities) unfolds. Borrowing from the New Testament redefines cultural boundaries: both exclusion and inclusion processes. Turning to Western culture as a kind of subversion of local culture pushes the former into an enclosed territory, leaving other cultural assets to languish outside. [...] Another distinction that should be made is between two approaches that may be called the *collective* and the *individual* approach. The first sees the relation to the New Testament from the perspective of the confrontation between Judaism and Christianity [...] while in the second approach the interest in Jesus and other central figures in the New Testament is individual, corresponding to the writer's emotional and psychological needs. [...] For an Israeli writer, therefore, Jesus is the archetype of the lonely person seeking the salvation of his soul, of one inhabiting the edges of the norm, the cursed [...] – in all of this, the Israeli artist, in a state of individual separateness, finds the answer in the search for the self as a nucleus of identity. *The New Testament thus offers a solution for the distress of secularism in Israeli culture, and the longing for the transcendent*, an option of spirituality that enables greater integration of the mysterious and the secular. (emphasis in original)⁵⁷

In modern Hebrew literature Graeco-Roman elements do not play the same productive and exciting role as the New Testament – perhaps because they do not represent an absolute Other as Christianity, and because they are at some distance from Christianity both in time and in relation to Christianity's physical presence in Israel. Nevertheless, one may say that references to Graeco-Roman elements in modern Hebrew poetry show a transition from a collective approach (as in Tchernichovsky's "Before the Statue of Apollo") to a personal / individual one (from Fichman's "On Reading Homer" onwards), and that for present-day Israeli writers the attachment to mythology remains a priori "a kind of subversion of local culture," in Kartun-Blum's words (above). Just as the figure of Jesus is interpreted according to the needs of Hebrew writers, so are figures from Greek and Roman mythologies. Thus Orpheus provides the example of the artist who sacrifices what is most precious to him for the sake of his art; and Odysseus is usually presented as a refugee and exile, uprooted

57 Kartun-Blum (2007), 3–4, 7–8, 11.

and displaced. As is evident in most of the examples discussed here, including poems written in an era considered free of national claims, writers tend to read Graeco-Roman narratives through Hebrew glasses and even “Judaize” them to a certain extent, like Gouri’s Odysseus who becomes a kind of Honi.⁵⁸

This chapter lacked the space to capture the variety of ways in which Graeco-Roman elements are present in Hebrew poetry. Among other things, with the exception of Lea Goldberg, it did not refer specifically to the important role played by women poets, who have provided an extensive creative corpus in this area as well, often giving the classical myth a subversive interpretation, challenging its essence as a masculine, patriarchal narrative. Also undeservedly excluded were significant contemporary poets such as Meir Wieseltier [מאיר ויזלטיר] (b. 1941) and Aharon Shabtai [אהרן שבתאי] (b. 1939) (who is not only an original poet but considered the greatest Greek-Hebrew translator in our time), as well as younger ones. Nevertheless, I trust that the intimate strangeness and strange intimacy between the Graeco-Roman classics and modern Hebrew literature have been made clear – a phenomenon reminiscent of the one described by Freud, namely the *heimlich* (canny) that is in fact *unheimlich* (uncanny). In the continuing story of the relations between Hebrew and Graeco-Roman cultures, Odysseus and his wet-nurse Eurycleia provide an apt analogy, through their infinite game of hide and seek: The “Hebrew” Eurycleia is young and at the same time old, or perhaps old and at the same time young (as in the popular drawing “My Wife and My Mother-in-Law” attributed to William Ely Hill). Sometimes she recognizes Odysseus’ scar and delights in his return; sometimes she mistakes him for someone else or seeks his help to recall who she is or prove that she belongs to his family. Odysseus, on the other hand, often continues to hide himself even after returning home, and sometimes stands embarrassed on the shore of his home island of Ithaca, recognizing it well.

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58 Ben-Porat (1979) seeks to chart a clear chronological progression in Hebrew literature – from the “Judaization” of foreign allusions to more objective and “secular” use of them. To support her argument, she relies on several Hebrew poems about Odysseus. It is my understanding, however, that the Hebrew platform always paints the foreign elements with a Hebrew shade, and only the degree of shading changes with time (and not necessarily in a linear progression, as argued by Ben-Porat).

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Italy's Long-Standing Classical Vocation

Lyric Poetry in the Twentieth Century

Nicola Gardini

1 Introduction: An Historical Overview

The classical legacy has shaped Italian lyric poetry ever since the beginnings of Italian literature. Imitation of ancient texts has provided rhetorical, stylistic, and literary paradigms, involving, in some cases, the very use of Latin. Petrarch himself (1304–1374), the author of such an influential vernacular book as the *Rerum Vulgarium Fragmenta* or *Canzoniere*, as the collection is also known internationally, composed numerous poetical works in Latin, including an epic poem, *Africa* (unfinished), and theorized about Latin imitation in some letters well before imitation became the focus of humanistic debates (in his day, ancient Greek was still largely unknown in Italy and Western Europe, and he was no exception).¹ As a matter of fact, Petrarch's indebtedness to Latin poetry appears extensive also in his vernacular poetry, *Canzoniere* and *Triumphs* [Trionfi].² While creating the modern lyric sequence and pushing the standards of the Italian language to a degree of unprecedented sophistication, Petrarch employed an imitative palette of extraordinary breadth, ranging from open quotation to cryptic allusion.

The canonization of Petrarch's *Canzoniere* as the model for vernacular poetry happened one century and a half after his death. During this span of time, a great deal of poetry was written in Latin. It was good, often excellent poetry. Panormita (Antonio Beccadelli, 1394–1471), Matteo Maria Boiardo (1440–1494), Politian (Poliziano, Angelo Ambrogini, 1454–1494), Giovanni Pontano (1426–1503), and Jacopo Sannazaro (1458–1530) are among the most prominent poets of this time of predominant neo-Latin writing and occasionally literary bilingualism. Politian also wrote refined epigrams in ancient Greek. Even such a champion of the vernacular as Ludovico Ariosto (1474–1533) started off as a Latin poet. But in 1525, things changed once and for all. Pietro Bembo (1470–1547), an important Latin poet and prose writer in his own right and

¹ DellaNeva (2007).

² See Gardini (1995).

an influential theorist of imitation in Latin, published his *Discourses on the Vernacular Language* [Prose della volgar lingua]. This book sanctioned the definitive triumph of the vernacular as the literary language of Italy by proclaiming Petrarch the sole model for poets (Ariosto's *Orlando furioso* itself, a narrative poem, was finally revised in accordance with Bembo's Petrarchist prescriptions). Any other linguistic option – Latin, dialect, and regional varieties – was discarded as unorthodox.

After Bembo's linguistic revolution, lyric poetry was to embody the most distinctive genre of Italy. Imitation now was fundamentally imitation of Petrarch. However, the classical legacy remained an essential component of poetic writing for all the centuries to come. Far from being a leftover of some outmoded humanism or a nostalgic tribute to a long-lost past, the classical legacy of the most engaged poets of modern Italy is intertwined with crucial questions on nationalism, modernism, and tradition, representing an essential ingredient of Italy's self-representation as a cultural entity.

In the so-called Romantic period, imitation of classical poetry and innovation went hand in hand. Ugo Foscolo (1778–1827) and Giacomo Leopardi (1798–1837), the master poets of the early nineteenth century, liberated themselves of all residual Petrarchism and grounded their poetical practices on a most fastidious command of Latin and Greek poetry, as is clear from the rich intertextuality of their poems, their translations from Homer, Virgil, Sappho and other ancient poets, their discourses on the nature and function of poetry, and the very fashioning of their poetic personas after lyric models of the classical tradition.³ Antiquity, for both poets, represented an absolute paradigm, an idealized form of civilization, some sort of golden age, which their poetry, to some degree, attempted to restore or at least celebrate for the solace of the unhappy moderns.

Lack of space prevents me from dwelling on Foscolo's and Leopardi's very interesting reflections on the classical past. We must move to the twentieth century. Let it suffice here to note that these two poets were to be recognized as authoritative figures for a long time. Through them, lyric poetry soared to unprecedented peaks, both thematically and formally, but after them, the social and aesthetic relevance of lyric poetry seemed exhausted. The Italians needed, and called for, a political literature which would advocate independence and unification. The novel took over as the new genre of modernity. Alessandro Manzoni's (1785–1873) career is a case in point. As a young man, he composed mythologizing verse in the manner of the contemporaneous neo-classical trend. After converting to Catholicism, he shifted to a new kind of

3 See Gardini (2008).

realistic poetry, openly anti-Petrarchist and anti-neoclassical, which adopted images and diction from the texts of the Christian religion. In the end, he decided to follow in the footsteps of Walter Scott (1771–1832) and turned to the novel form, which appeared to accommodate most ideally his investigations of such crucial issues as human and divine justice, class struggle, and the meaning of human action, and would mark the beginning of a new Italian literature for all Italians, on a par with the most developed literatures of Europe.

The focus of Manzoni's discourse is history. The rhetorical and stylistic baggage of the classical legacy (despite some references to Virgil in his novel *The Betrothed* [I promessi sposi], 1827; final form 1840) and also of Bembo's Petrarchist rule could not be less relevant; indeed, Manzoni proposed the *spoken* Tuscan of his day as the new literary standard. The same rejection of the classical legacy is obvious in the outputs of other novelists: Ippolito Nievo (1831–1861), Giovanni Verga (1840–1922), and Federico De Roberto (1861–1927), all of whom committedly observed and described the problematic conditions of Italy's peripheries.

Bembo's normalization of Petrarch and the vernacular was supplanted by that of Francesco De Sanctis (1817–1883), another champion of Romantic aesthetics, like Manzoni. While Bembo marginalized all Italian literature that was not written in Petrarch's or Boccaccio's Tuscan vernacular (his theoretical goal being the promotion of the vernacular to the high status of Latin), De Sanctis dismissed all linguistic expressions that showed no direct connection with Italy's history (his theoretical goal being the codification of an Italian literature that would show the linguistic and cultural unity of Italy prior to the actual political unification) and thus ended up constructing a prevalently vernacular canon in which the great classicist poets of the fifteenth century are dismissed as just "letterati." Understandably, in De Sanctis's patriotic view all Latin and classicizing poets – not just those of the fifteenth century, but also Giambattista Marino (1569–1625), the Arcadians (the members of the Accademia degli Arcadi, founded in 1690), and the neo-classical poets – were inherently quotational and unrealistic, that is, irresponsibly removed from "life" (one of De Sanctis's key words).

Despite the growing popularity of novels, poetry managed to reassert its status with three inherently classicizing poets: Giosuè Carducci (1835–1907), Giovanni Pascoli (1855–1912), and Gabriele D'Annunzio (1863–1938). Their influence – and especially that of Pascoli and D'Annunzio – was great throughout the twentieth century. Yet, while Giuseppe Ungaretti (1888–1970) and Eugenio Montale (1896–1981; Nobel prize laureate, 1975) have gained international acclaim over the past decades, these three poets are still very much unknown outside the realm of Italian studies, despite the fact that Carducci was the first Italian to receive the Nobel Prize in literature, in 1906 ("not only

in consideration of his deep learning and critical research, but above all as a tribute to the creative energy, freshness of style, and lyrical force which characterize his poetic masterpieces").⁴ This is mainly due to the fact that satisfactory selections of their vast opuses are not yet available in English.⁵ For example, the only available translations of D'Annunzio's masterpiece *Alcyone* are far from being accurate representations of the original – except for "The Rain in the Pinewood" [La pioggia nel pineto] translated by Jonathan Galassi.⁶

When speaking of the classical legacy in modern Italy, one finds himself in a sort of house of mirrors, and therefore must separate very carefully actual images from self-multiplying reflections, innovation from repetition, original creation from scholastic exercise. This is all the more true in the twentieth century when the classical legacy begins to compete with the growing influence of foreign models, French poetry in the first place. To what avail should one stay with the ancients when Mallarmé, Valéry, or Apollinaire tell you to go in very different directions? Of course, the two traditions – the French and the classical – are not mutually exclusive. Indeed, they are intriguingly conflated in the work of some poets (Valéry himself translated Virgil's *Eclogues*). The fact remains that at a time of pervasive infiltration of foreign models, the classical legacy for such poets as Pascoli and, before him, Carducci (who did, however, regularly read and even translate foreign poets) took on a strong nationalistic function, while perpetuating an aulic, highly rhetorical idea of poetry.⁷ In the rest of the twentieth century, a steady rejection, partial marginalization or radical revision of Carducci's, Pascoli's, and D'Annunzio's styles inevitably exposed the classical tradition, on which they drew, to a process of radical critique.

2 Giosuè Carducci: The Music of Classical Poetry and Historical Nostalgia

Carducci stands out as a highly authoritative role model, and a scholarly, staunchly "educational" poet. Having taught Greek at a high-school level in

4 http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1906/carducci-facts.html. See also below.

5 On the contrary, for Montale, see Montale (1998) and (2012), and, for Ungaretti, see Ungaretti (1971).

6 Included in Brock (2012), 27–9. See also below, p. 344. Translations in this chapter are my own, unless otherwise noted.

7 For the term "aulic," see, for example, Montale (1982), 300: "I wanted to wring the neck of the eloquence of our old aulic language, even at the risk of a counter-eloquence" [All'eloquenza della nostra vecchia lingua aulica volevo torcere il collo, magari a rischio di una controeloquenza]; on Montale, see below.

Pistoia, in his native region of Tuscany, he was appointed professor of Italian literature at the University of Bologna at the age of twenty-five. There Pascoli was one of his students and succeeded him after his retirement. For Carducci, classical antiquity represented a heroic stage in human history, one of moral strength and primeval nobility, and an ideal of stylistic perfection. In his *Barbarian Odes* [*Odi barbare*] (1877 and 1889), he attempted to replicate the high ethical and linguistic standards of the ancients. The title ironically advertised the innovative metrics of the poems. Carducci had given up the traditional Italian metrics, based on a regulated sequence of syllables and stresses, and had fashioned new rhythmic patterns after the model of Latin quantitative metrics. Ultimately, these new metrics combined fragments of the old vernacular system in unprecedented sequences, which, while sounding “barbarian” to the ear of an ancient poet (and, indeed, strangely artificial to an Italian ear), did attempt to conjure up the music of classical poetry. Far from being complacently anachronistic, Carducci’s metrical experiment was a significant reform, which paved the way for free verse in Italy (something the Germans and French had already attempted).

Why, in any case, did Carducci want to resurrect the sound of classical poetry? Carducci was both a passionate defender of antiquity and – unlike Manzoni – a proudly anti-Christian patriot. By bringing ancient poetry into the modern world, he believed he could reconnect the history of Christian and post-unification Italy with its pagan roots, when Rome was the undisputed moral and political head of the world (*caput mundi*). Interestingly, unlike De Sanctis, Carducci appreciated the importance of fifteenth-century Latin poetry and offered a significant critical reappraisal of a poet like Pontano, vindicating the anti-Christian dimension of his poetry and his modernity.

Carducci’s classicism was ultimately political. It did express nostalgia, but such nostalgia was not of an abstract or idealizing nature: it was historical, archaeological nostalgia; it was longing for a specific time in human history when a great people built a great political and military power. The “myth of Rome,” which would dominate the early twentieth century and provide Fascism with firm ideological foundations, surfaced first in Carducci’s poetry.⁸

3 Ventriloquizing the Ancients: Giovanni Pascoli, Risorgimento Ideology, and the Poetry of the “Fanciullino”

Pascoli’s eclectic and militant classicism has made him the most paradigmatic representative of the classical legacy in Italian modern poetry. His indebtedness

8 See Gentile (2011).

to ancient poetry occurred in an admirably diversified orchestration of literary guises: intertextuality, thematic references to ancient authors, composition of Latin verse, translations from Greek and Latin poetry, criticism, metrical experiments and theorization, and involvement with the school system (the teaching of Latin and Greek, articles on classical education in Italy, and the editing of anthologies of Latin authors). Indeed, his ideal readers were schoolboys and schoolgirls. This last point – educating the very young – is crucial, not only when we deal with Pascoli. Any discourse on the classical legacy in Italy cannot overlook the (always implied) background of classical studies, that is, the learning of Latin and Greek at school, which constitutes the distinctive backbone of Italy's education system, both before and after the unification.⁹ This institutional aspect inevitably affects the aesthetic, cultural, and ideological message of classical references in poetry. As Pascoli's classicism ultimately emerged in the wake of a long national tradition (of which Carducci marked a peak), and without possessing any obvious innovative power, it looks rather conservative today. On the contrary, Ezra Pound's classicism – representing a very different literary and scholastic background – immediately comes across as refreshing and even avant-garde. Carducci's and Pascoli's professional knowledge of Latin and Greek may even seem to conflict with the possibility or very nature of poetic creativity. Certainly, the radical, archaizing classicism of their styles has prevented them from becoming well known outside the Italian language, and even there now it sounds quite distant and obsolete – which is not necessarily true of older poets like Foscolo and Leopardi, or even Petrarch. On the contrary, Pound's limited familiarity with Latin and Greek resulted in an experiment as provocative as his translation of Propertius or the *incipit* of his *Cantos*.

Pascoli interspersed his verse with elements reminiscent of ancient poetry. Or, to put it more accurately, his familiarity with ancient poetry prompted him to write a great deal of imitative poetry. The massive and complex intertextuality of his verse ranges from very subtle allusions to most overt quotation, a thickly woven net of ramifying and interrelated metaphors, motifs, and symbols (for example, the recurring image of light, which ultimately is to be traced to Sappho and refers – more or less cryptically – to female virginity, one of Pascoli's obsessions).¹⁰ In one particular collection, the *Banquet Songs* [*Poemi conviviali*] (1904), he went as far as to adopt themes and situations from

9 I addressed the pedagogical importance of Latin and Greek in the Italian education system in my books *Long Live Latin*, 2019 [originally published in Italian as *Viva il latino*, 2016], and *Viva il greco*, 2021 [Long Live Greek].

10 Cecilia Piantanida (2014) has demonstrated that Pascoli's translations of Sappho – most of which remained unpublished in a notebook – are not just literary exercises but part of Pascoli's elusive discourse on sex.

Sappho, Homer, and many other ancient poets. This collection ventriloquized the ancients, retelling the story of Odysseus or personifying Solon. The context of the poems is antiquity throughout: the remote, original dimension of the past. The classical world appears to be the ideal stage on which to observe the universal meaning of human life and the function of poetry. By speaking like an ancient, Pascoli gave an archaeological, even anthropological foundation to his own poetry and to poetry in general, exploring such classical themes as death, destiny, and language.

Pascoli was also a gifted Latin poet. As such, he composed numerous collections. There too the setting is consistently ancient, including both the pagan and the Christian world. His skillful Latin writing brought him thirteen golden medals at the international Amsterdam contest of neo-Latin poetry (from the sale of five medals he gained enough money to buy himself a new house). As is easy to imagine, the adoption of Latin made the archetypal dimension of his poetic discourse all the more radical and militant.

One should keep in mind that Pascoli's idea of Latin is part of his passionately nationalistic faith, and, more generally, the ultimate version of Risorgimento ideology. The cult of Rome, which we have seen already in Carducci and on which Fascism was to found a substantial part of its propaganda, became increasingly prominent after the unification in 1861, helping the Italian nation to regain a long lost sense of political relevance, to reassert their unity, and even to justify newly reborn dreams of colonial expansion – which Pascoli himself entertained and publicly supported.¹¹ While not unique to his case, the cult of Rome was undoubtedly voiced by him in memorable and paradigmatic terms, as is apparent from his Latin hymn to Rome, *Hymnus in Romam* (which he also translated into Italian) in 1911, on the fiftieth anniversary of the unification of Italy, as well as from a speech he gave on the occasion of that same anniversary. Let me single out some telling lines from the speech, where the connection between the triumphs of the Risorgimento and those of ancient Rome is patent:

Puri, come nella celebrazione romana della Palingsesi, dobbiamo assistere alla festa del nostro Risorgimento. [...] A Roma si dirigano le vie di fiamma; a Roma, per la quale tutti i popoli della penisola divennero il popolo italico solo. A lei ritorni questo ardore e questa luce che ella conservò nel suo tempio che era un focolare, e che sparse per tutta l'Italia, illuminando tutta la terra. Roma, l'amata, la *bellissima della terra*, ancor non era, e per lei, nei tempi che la poesia vede e la storia no, si combatteva

11 See Gardini (2007).

e si moriva da esuli venuti d'oriente e da tutti i popoli indigeni d'allora. [...] Chi primo sognò e divinò e annunziò e preparò l'unità, mosse dal pensier di Roma. Roma e unità d'Italia sono parole che valgono una sola cosa.

[Pure, just like on the Roman holiday of Palingenesi,¹² we must take part in the celebration of our Risorgimento. [...] Let all flaming paths lead to Rome; to Rome, for whom all the peoples of the peninsula became one Italian people.¹³ To her let this ardour and light return – that she kept in her temple, as in a hearth, and spread across Italy, lighting up the whole earth. Rome, the loved one, the most beautiful in the whole world, did not exist yet, nonetheless, in those times when poetry could see and history could not, exiles from the East and all the indigenous peoples of those days fought for her. [...] He who first dreamed of, prophesied, announced, and prepared unity, started from the idea of Rome. Rome and unity are words that mean the same thing.]¹⁴

Before concluding his speech, Pascoli also mentioned Virgil and Horace as the bards of the newly resurrected Italy, quoting some lines from the *Aeneid* (XI, 24–6) and paraphrasing the *Carmen Saeculare* (lines 45–8) – that is, he used the most powerful examples of ideological literature ever produced under Augustus, or (to put it in more explicit terms) two deeply engaged justifications of Rome's military imperialism.

The limits of this chapter prevent me from attempting any close reading of Pascoli's verse and from analyzing his letter to the critic Giuseppe Chiarini (1833–1908) on how to adapt ancient metrics to modern metrics – a preoccupation which he took from his master Carducci and with which he practically dealt in his translations from Homer.¹⁵ However, before moving to D'Annunzio, I must spend a few words on Pascoli's essay "The Little Child" [*Il fanciullino*] (1897). This beautiful and very popular essay is a sort of poetics. Unlike most forms of poetics, however, Pascoli's is a reflection on the characteristics of the ideal poet rather than a discussion of his own literary program. He makes a rather simple point: every human individual has a child in himself, but at one point he ceases to listen to him. Only poets remain in touch with the

12 Pascoli is likely to be referring here to the ancient pastoral festival of Lupercalia.

13 Notice that the original has "italico" (not "italiano"), an adjective indicating the inhabitants of Italy in pre-Roman times.

14 "On the Fiftieth Anniversary of the Homeland" [*Nel cinquantenario della patria*], in Pascoli (1946), 339 and 345. Emphasis in the original.

15 See Gardini (2011).

child within, who connects them directly with the most authentic sources of their psychic life and makes them respond creatively to the stimuli of reality. Pascoli's theory of the little child rests on a passage of Plato's *Phaedo* (or *On the Soul*) (77e) about the "child within us," as he acknowledges: the little child is the voice of the soul. But Pascoli expands on the Platonic source, making the "fanciullino" a prototype of poetic creation and a paragon of perceptiveness. The "fanciullino's" most active sense is vision. As is obvious from the numerous occurrences of the verb "vedere" (to see), he enjoys using his sight, and he sees things in a completely different, fresh, and original way. He sees things that others fail to see. He pays attention to the minutest details. Interestingly, the names of Virgil and Horace appear in this essay too. But here they do not serve as imperial spokesmen. Quite the opposite. They are representatives of true poetry, the poetry of the "fanciullino," who contents himself with little things. Nonetheless, I should add that the name of Virgil, here too, is not completely deprived of some political message – a political message which can easily escape notice, but which is crucial, contributing a further layer to Pascoli's stratified classical imagination. In compliance with his "fanciullino's" inborn sense of equality, Virgil – Pascoli argues – is a defender of liberty and democracy; in his *Georgics* there are no slaves; there are servants, but they are free individuals. In his passionate attempt at proving the paradigmatic humanness of Virgil's poetry, Pascoli goes as far as to deny – and this is quite a remarkable difference from his later views – that the *Aeneid* is a military poem:

nell'*Eneide* Virgilio canta guerre e battaglie; eppure tutto il senso della mirabile epopea è in quel cinguettio mattutino di rondini o passerì, che sveglia Evandro nella sua capanna, là dove avevano da sorgere i palazzi imperiali di Roma!

Chapter XI

[In the *Aeneid*, Virgil sings wars and battles; yet, the sense of this wonderful epic is utterly expressed in that morning chirping of swallows or sparrows which wakes up Evander in his hut, there where the imperial palaces of Rome were destined to rise!]¹⁶

For Pascoli, in the end, poetry is civilization. It may not be openly patriotic or civic, but it does help societies and states to grow in happiness.

16 Pascoli (1992), 49.

4 Gabriele D'Annunzio: Antiquity as an Eternal Present

The champion of Italian aestheticism, D'Annunzio had an aestheticizing approach to the ancient classics. While he consciously put his early verse under the shadow of Carducci and always expressed great admiration for Pascoli's Greek and Latin education, he made ancient poetry into one of the numerous components of his iridescent style and *Weltanschauung*. Carducci and Pascoli considered antiquity in terms of historical memory. On the contrary, D'Annunzio represented antiquity as a sort of suspended, eternal present: the distilled, amber-like beauty of timeless time. For him, antiquity was ultimately an embellished, mythical version of the present, whatever present; a mask or make-up on the face of life *as life* (I will return to this concept in a moment). His intertextuality, grounded as it is on patent quotation, is a cabinet of curiosities, a museum of de-historicized items, deconstructing ancient poetry into a set of ready-made images, mythical paradigms, and precious clichés. No consistent idea of antiquity can be formed from D'Annunzio's innumerable references to ancient poetry. Antiquity, indeed, is not the point. D'Annunzio operated like a collector of antiques. The purpose of collecting is making a collection, where each piece ceases to be a mnemonic trace, a fragment, and is totally integrated into the present actuality of the collector's room. Also, a collection is never finished; it lends itself, by definition, to inexhaustible additions. This is indeed the case with D'Annunzio's literary debts to the ancients: they go into most diverging directions. Unlike Carducci and Pascoli, D'Annunzio had no personal canon of ancient poets. Also, his indebtedness to ancient literature came with no educational implication or purpose. He was not a teacher, either at high-school level or at university. Allusions to, or even translations of, such master authors as Homer, Sappho, Virgil, and Horace – the most cherished of Carducci and Pascoli – surface along with a plethora of references to minor poets and stock symbols of classicism, such as Latin titles, Latinate vocabulary and spelling, quotations, nymphs, Apollos, and metrical patterns (mostly, Alcaic stanzas and elegies).

That said, the classical legacy is all but a purely quotational or formalistic feature of D'Annunzio's poetry. I have already used the word "life" – a very popular one among European writers in the first decades of the twentieth century (we saw that De Sanctis cherished it greatly, but in a realistic sense, as in the French phrase "*tranche de vie*").¹⁷ The classical legacy fed D'Annunzio's "rhetoric of life." What was life for him, then? Sensuality, irrationality, physical enjoyment, impulse and instinct, violence, pagan athleticism, nudity – as is most

¹⁷ See above, p. 334.

paradigmatically obvious from D'Annunzio's poetic masterpiece *Alcyone*, a collection of eighty-eight poems published in 1903. Ancient sources crucially contributed to D'Annunzio's mythologization of the human dimension – a transfiguring process which banished all realistic triviality from the space of writing and brought history to some a-historical, absolute, and ever-occurring Dionysian beginning (which is also true of D'Annunzio's prose works; Nietzsche, of course, looms in the background, and forebodings of fascistic masculinity are clearly there). Ovid's aesthetics of transformation provided a significant model.

The very title *Alcyone* was drawn from one of the stories in the *Metamorphoses* (book XI). According to the myth, Alcyone's husband Ceyx leaves to consult an oracle, but he drowns in a storm. His ghost appears to Alcyone in a dream. She then reaches the shore and the floating body of her husband appears. In the end, they are both turned into sea birds. This is one of the most poignant and beautifully told stories in the *Metamorphoses*. However, D'Annunzio did not seem to be interested in the narrative dimension of Ovid's transformations. His concept of transformation basically pertains to a vision of nature as dynamism, energy, and never-ending hybridization – which is only partially true of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (transformations there serving also as instruments of divine justice or as allegories of moral states).¹⁸ In *Alcyone*, the mixed figure of the Centaur in the poem "The Death of the Stag" [La morte del cervo] is a telling symbol of D'Annunzio's naturalism – Centaurs too appeared in Ovid's poetry, and D'Annunzio obviously appropriated some of Ovid's vocabulary, like the adjective "bimembre" (having double members) in *Metamorphoses* XII, 240 and 494:

Un uomo era. A una frotta d'anitroccoli
Sbigottita egli rise. Intesi il croscio.
Repente si gittò su per lo scoscio
Della ripa, saltò su quattro zoccoli!

Lo conobbi tremando a foglia a foglia.
Ben era il generato dalla Nube
Acro e bimembre, uomo fin quasi al pube,
Stallone il resto dalla grossa coglia.

[He was a man. He laughed at a frightened herd
Of ducklings. I heard his coarse voice.

¹⁸ On this see Gardini (2019), 121–30.

Suddenly he leapt up the cliff
Of the river-bank, jumping on four feet!

I recognized him trembling in every limb,
He was indeed the child of the Cloud
Harsh and twofold, a man above his crotch,
A stallion with a large scrotum all beneath.]

lines 17–24

The speaking spectator's reaction is as dramatic as the description of the Centaur (which continues in the following lines). He is terrified and shaken. At the same time, his soul is "inebriated by archaic forces" [*l'anima erami ebra / d'antiche forze*] (lines 43–4). The rest of the poem stages a gory struggle between the Centaur and the stag (of the poem's title). The language conjures up most effectively the sounds of the mangling violence, the muscular effort of the two combatants, and the bloody anatomical details. The triumphant Centaur makes trophies out of the horns of his victim. In the restored quiet of the place, only the sea and the rustling trees are audible. A cloud appears in the sky and the Centaur pays homage to her (in the ancient myth, his mother was *Nephele*, a cloud, as the quoted lines also tell). This is the spectator's comment in the concluding quatrain:

Bellissimo m'apparve. In ogni muscolo
Gli fremeva una vita inimitabile.
Repente s'impennò. Sparve Ombra labile
Verso il Mito nell'ombra del crepuscolo.

[He appeared beautiful to me. In every muscle
An inimitable life pulsed.
Suddenly he rose. He disappeared, a vanishing Shadow,
Into the twilight shadows, towards the Myth.]

lines 157–60

The Centaur, in his mythical essence, embodies the beauty of some indomitable natural strength, of male potency ("grossa coglia," line 24 (above); "il prepotente sesso" (the overpotent sex), line 121; "s'impennò," line 159 (above), which suggests an erection), of "an inimitable life," to which the poet himself aspires and after which poetry painstakingly fashions itself.

In D'Annunzio's nature, all living forms are expressions of one vital source; there is no difference between the human and the animalistic. Indeed, every human individual is an animal to some degree, or even a plant, as D'Annunzio

shows in *Alcyone's* most emblematic poem "The Rain in the Pinewood" [La pioggia nel pineto], one of the most musical poems ever written in the Italian language. Here, the woman, Hermione [Ermione] (a precious-sounding Greek name which, in ancient mythology, belonged to the daughter of Helen of Troy), is caught by a summer downpour. In a beautiful scene of regeneration, her human identity vanishes into the unifying space of nature and becomes part of an immanent totality:

Piove su le tue ciglia nere
 Sì che par che tu pianga
 Ma di piacere; non bianca
 Ma quasi fatta virente,
 Par da scorza tu esca.
 E tutta la vita è in noi fresca
 Aulente,
 Il cuor nel petto è come pesca
 Intatta,
 Tra le palpebre gli occhi
 Son come polle tra l'erbe,
 I denti negli alveoli
 Son come mandorle acerbe.
 E andiam di fratta in fratta,
 Or congiunti or disciolti
 (E il verde vigor rude
 Ci allaccia i malleoli
 C'intrica i ginocchi)
 Chi sa dove, chi sa dove!

[It rains on your dark
 Lashes so it seems you're
 Crying, but from happiness;
 You seem to be emerging
 From the bark not white,
 But nearly green. And all of
 Life is fresh and fragrant
 In us, the heart in the
 Breast is like an intact
 Peach, the eyes among their
 Lashes are like springs in
 The grass, the teeth in the

Gums are bitter almonds.
 And we move from glade to
 Glade, now together, now
 Apart (and the green rude
 Vigor binds our ankles,
 Catches at our knees)
 Who knows where, who knows!]
 lines 97–115¹⁹

This passage is clearly reminiscent of the numerous humans changed into plants in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. The vocabulary is suggestively Latinate. D'Annunzio loves words that sound like Latin dactyls, that is, words stressed on the antepenultimate syllable (stressed syllable + unstressed syllable + unstressed syllable) or, in Italian, in "sdrucchioli": "pálpebre," "alvéoli," "mándorle," "malléoli." At the same time, the passage could not be more removed from Ovid's notion of metamorphosis. In D'Annunzio the vegetal state is *physically* (not morally!) implied in the human form itself. Whatever metamorphosis may seem to happen is merely a visualization/metaphorization of original features: the heart is *like* a peach, the eyelids are *like* puddles in the grass, etc. Simultaneity of different appearances and ontologies rather than the actual change of the physical aspect is at the core of D'Annunzio's Ovidianism; namely, the everlasting presence of an ancient divine dimension (the divinity of nature) or the memory of some immemorial time in men's and women's temporalities.

Interestingly, a man remembering his lost divinity speaks in "Dithyramb 11" [Ditirambo 11] (the dithyramb is a Greek composition in honor of Dionysus), again from *Alcyone*. This man is Glaucus, who joyously turned into a fish after tasting some strange herb and thus acquired divine status. He too appears in a passage of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (the end of book XIII, lines 940–8), which D'Annunzio closely imitates and expands on. Here is an abstract from Ovid's account of the myth of Glaucus:

obstipui dubitoque diu causamque requiro,
 num deus hoc aliquis, num sucus fecerit herbae:
 "quae tamen has" inquam "vires habet herba?" manuque
 pabula decerpsi decerptaue dente momordi.
 vix bene conbiberant ignotos guttura sucos,
 cum subito trepidare intus praecordia sensi
 alteriusque rapi naturae pectus amore;

19 Trans. Jonathan Galassi, in Brock (2012), 27–9.

nec potui restare diu "repetenda" que "numquam
terra, vale!" dixi corpusque sub aequora mersi.

[I stood a long time in amaze and doubt, seeking the cause of this. Had some god done it, or was it the grasses' juice? "And yet what herb could have such potency?" I said, and plucking some of the herbage with my hands, I chewed what I had plucked. Scarce had I swallowed the strange juices when suddenly I felt my heart trembling within me, and my whole being yearned with desire for another element. Unable long to stand against it, I cried aloud: "Farewell, O Earth, to which I shall nevermore return!" and I plunged into the sea.]²⁰

Here is D'Annunzio's reworking of these lines:

E quasi inconsapevole
La man correarmi per quell'erba strania,
Meditando io nell'animo
Il prodigio. Divelsi dalle radici
Gli steli foschi; e, simile
A capra di virgulti avida, mordere
Incominciai, discernere
E mordere. Rigavami le fauci
Il suco, ne' precordia
Scendeami, tutto il petto conturbandomi.
"O terra!" gridai. Fumida
Era la terra intorno come nuvola
Che fosse per dissolversi
Ne' cieli, sotto i piedi miei fuggevole.
E un amore terribile
Sorgeva in me, dell'infinito pelago,
Dell'amata salsedine,
Degli abissi, dei vortici e dei turbini.

[And almost unwillingly
My hand explored the strange herb,
While I pondered over the prodigy
In my soul. I ripped the dark stalks
From the roots. And like a goat

20 Trans. by Frank Justus Miller (Loeb ed., 1916).

Hungry for tender grass, I started
 To bite, to cull
 And to bite. Juice dripped
 Down my chin, it ran down
 My stomach, upsetting my entire heart.
 "O earth!" I cried. The earth around
 Was steamy like a cloud
 Which is about to dissolve
 In the sky, vanishing under my feet.
 And a terrible love
 Was born in me – for the limitless sea,
 For bitter brine,
 For abysses, vortices, and whirlpools.]

lines 76–93

This passage seethes with "dactyls" (see the ending words of every line in the original). More importantly, the order of its narrative moments closely follows Ovid's text. So does the vocabulary: *discerpere/decerpsi*; *mordere/momordi*; *precordia/praecordia*; *petto/pectus*; *terra/terra* (further down, line 104, Glaucus will say "Terra, vale," just like in Ovid); *amore/amore*. Nonetheless, D'Annunzio's imitation radically departs from Ovid's text: while Ovid's Glaucus became a god permanently through the metamorphosis, D'Annunzio's Glaucus resumed his human shape and nature and now pleads with the gods to restore him back to the form of a fish:

O Iddii profondi, richiamate l'esule
 Triste, purificatelo
 Sotto i fiumi lustrali inferi e superi,
 La deità rendetegli!

[O Gods of the depths, call back the sad
 Exile, purify him
 Under your lustral earthly and subterranean rivers,
 Return godhead to him!]

lines 29–32

The actual metamorphosis (described in lines 94–103 of the poem and in accordance with Ovid's text) is a mere memory, nothing but nostalgia: "I do remember my metamorphosis" [*Memore sono della metamorfosi*] (line 9); "I do remember" [*Memore sono*] (line 33). I should also stress that memory is

already in Ovid's text. Once again, however, thematic similarity comes with a crucial difference: Ovid's Glaucus remembers the transformation he went through, but his memory cannot retrieve the entire process. Oblivion at one point took over (something Dante – a fastidious imitator of Ovid – experiences in *Paradiso*): “So far I can recall and tell you what befell me; so far can I remember. But of the rest my mind retains no knowledge” [*Hactenus acta tibi possum memoranda referre, / hactenus haec memini; nec mens mea cetera sensit*] (*Met.* XIII, 956–7).²¹ As a matter of fact, oblivion is no problem. The transformation was successful and is still lasting. D'Annunzio's Glaucus, on the contrary, remembers an event that has ceased to be. He remembers everything, but that everything is now merely loss.

In this particular case, D'Annunzio appropriated one of Ovid's narratives of transformation, but the point for him – which perfectly chimes with his general understanding of transformation – was not the event of transformation in itself, but the concept of duality (divinity and humanity) associated with transformation. D'Annunzio's Ovidian perspective is inherently Christological. Christ too had a double nature, Christ too was both things, a man and a god. Still, D'Annunzio's point of view remains obstinately pagan. He is by no means interested in teleology or eschatology, but in the persistence of the original unity in every form of life.

It goes without saying that for D'Annunzio too the myth of the origins had political implications. Ancient Rome represented a sort of reborn ideal, the ultimate metamorphosis of the present, as we read in “*Dithyramb 1*” [*Ditirambo 1*] (lines 400–15): once again, historical distance is abolished, time is traced as far back as the arrival of Aeneas in Latium (the source of course is Virgil's *Aeneid*), and the past triumphs over contingency as the truest version of reality (notice the Latinate rhythm of the ending words – all of which are dactyl-sounding or “*sdrucchioli*”) (emphasis is mine):

Par nelle cose nascere
 Una *vita indicibile*,
 Però che i prischî numi italici,
 Subitamente reduci
 Dall'*ombra* delle Origini,
 Nella gleba rivivano,
 Nell'acqua nell'*erba* nella silice,
 E laggiù entro la reggia
 Del re Latino figlio
 Di Marica e di Fauno,

21 Trans. by Frank Justus Miller (Loeb ed., 1916).

Rinverdiscasi il Lauro
 Che fu sacro ad Apolline
 Febo pria che il vedovo
 Di Creusa da Ilio
 Venisse per congiungersi
 Con Lavinia vergine fertile.
O prodigio! O metamorfosi!

[An untellable life
 Seems to appear in things
 So that the ancient Italian deities,
 Suddenly coming back
 From the Shadow of the Origins,
 May relive in the earth,
 In the water in the grass in the rock,
 And down there, in the palace
 Of King Latinus, the son
 Of Marica and Faunus,
 The Laurel may bloom again
 Which was sacred to Phoebus
 Apollo before the widower
 Of Creusa came
 From Troy to be coupled
 With Lavinia, the fertile virgin.
O prodigy! O metamorphosis!]

As is clear from the highlighted words, D'Annunzio's vocabulary, whether he is discussing the transformation of a man into a fish (as in "Dithyramb II"), or the dual nature of the Centaur (as in "The Death of the Stag"), or the rebirth of early Rome (as in "Dithyramb I"), is the same.

The miraculous reappearance (or epiphany) of a lost origin is one of the paradigms of D'Annunzio's imagination (which Montale will take from him – depriving it, though, of all celebratory rhetoric), and the most original contribution of his work to the classical legacy in Italian modern poetry.

5 The Hermetics, Salvatore Quasimodo, and the Question of Translation

During the Thirties, Italian poetry underwent radical transformations, which involved the classical legacy very directly. A new generation of anti-fascist

poets, the so-called “ermetici,” rejected both the subversive experimentalism of Futuristic avant-garde (Marinetti and his followers) and D’Annunzio’s luscious aesthetics, and polemically promoted semantic compactness, verbal sparseness, and widespread metaphoricity to oppose the mendacious propaganda of the fascist regime. The dry style of Ungaretti’s *The Buried Harbour* [Il porto sepolto] (1916) provided these new poets with an important model. So did the nihilistic vision of Montale’s *Cuttlefish Bones* [Ossi di seppia] (1925), which was saluted as a critique of Italy’s present moral decay. By fighting political and stylistic despotism in the same breath, the Hermeticists strove to trace poetry back to some pure and unmarred historical beginning, championing an ideal of linguistic truth.

One of the most successful and emblematic poets in the Hermetic group, Salvatore Quasimodo (1901–1968; Nobel Prize laureate in 1959) combined the Hermetic quest for a new origin with a rediscovery of early Greek lyricism. His Sicilian heritage very likely added some autobiographical dimension to the poet’s interest in the Greek lyric poetry. In 1940, after publishing five collections of original verse (all of which include numerous references to ancient Greek and Latin poets), he published his *Greek Lyrics* [Lirici greci], a book of translations from: Sappho, Alcaeus, Erinna, Anacreon, Alcman, Stesichorus, Ibycus, Simonides, Mimnermus, Archilochus, Theognis, and a few others – monodic poets being the majority (choral poets such as Pindar and Bacchylides were completely excluded).²² This selection of post-Homeric lyrical gems was to constitute Quasimodo’s claim to fame.²³ Luciano Anceschi (1911–1995), then an emerging militant theorist of poetry, endorsed the cultural significance of the volume with an *engagé* preface, which positioned Quasimodo’s translation work in Italian cultural history and his own artistic trajectory. For Anceschi, Quasimodo’s *Greek Lyrics* was not just a breakthrough in the history of translation from antiquity but represented one of Quasimodo’s original books of poetry. To this day, it is considered one of the most beautiful achievements of Italian lyricism in the twentieth century, and Quasimodo’s best work. Anceschi promptly understood the nature of Quasimodo’s enterprise: in his words, antiquity came forward as a representation of some “earthly paradise,” a regained land of happiness, in which modernity’s frustrated aspirations were restored to their original fullness.

22 Quasimodo’s published poetry collections before *Lirici greci* are: *Waters and Lands* [Acque e terre] (1930), *Sunken Oboe* [Oboe sommerso] (1932), *Essence of Eucalyptus and Other Poems* [Odore di eucalyptus e altri versi] (1933), *Erato and Apollyon* [Erato e Apollion] (1936), *New Poems* [Nuove poesie] (1938).

23 Piantanida (2021), 108–11.

Why was the publication of Quasimodo's *Greek Lyrics* so important? First, it promoted translation to a fully-fledged form of poetry.²⁴ Secondly, as Anceschi underlines, it shifted the focus from Homer or from the Latin poets (Virgil and Horace) to Sappho, Alcaeus and other voices of early Greek poetry; namely, from the lofty tone of epic to the simplicity of individual subjectivities, or – as he put it – “a history of the human heart” [storia del cuore dell'uomo].²⁵ Anceschi employed the word “history” in a very idiosyncratic manner. It implied no narrative or chronicle but was intended as a condition of one's interiority. *Greek Lyrics*' language were music and song – a private and intimate language (these two adjectives are Anceschi's: “privato,” “intimo”),²⁶ which could not be separated from the individual's speaking voice. Translation, then, is rendering the voice of the ancient poet through the voice of the modern poet. To put it another way, translation is a process through which all temporal distance between antiquity and modernity vanishes, and poetry is revived in its absoluteness, as pure poetry, and not as a verbal description of something else. Translation consists of an ability to appropriate a certain manner of utterance; it has nothing to do with the ancillary account of a given situation. In translation, original song and music are re-enacted as if for the very first time.

There is another crucial aspect in Quasimodo's appropriation of Greek lyrics, which Anceschi fails to bring to the fore: the texts translated are *fragments*. In Quasimodo's Hermetic aesthetics, poetry is no diffuse or pervasive thing. It opposes narrative, emerging almost magically from details, from hidden corners, from shadowy folds, and concentrating only in some distilled linguistic cores. Poetry advocates exclusion and allusion, discontinuity and lacunas. It is like music: it needs silences, blanks, interruptions, as is paradigmatically obvious from Ungaretti's sketchy, crisp, and at times obscure language, which, though not programmatically Hermetic, represented a significant (and influential) forerunner of Hermetic literary aesthetics and stylistics.

Closing his Preface to *Greek Lyrics*, Anceschi briefly praised an unfinished essay by the critic Renato Serra (1884–1915), entitled “On the Way in Which We Read the Greeks” [Intorno al modo di leggere i Greci].²⁷ Serra was a student of Carducci at Bologna, and wrote important essays on Pascoli's poetry, and on Carducci himself. He died in the trenches during the Great War at the age of thirty-one, leaving his wonderful literary gifts only partially fulfilled. His emphasis on style makes him a pioneering representative of the “critica

24 On the practice of poetical translation in twentieth-century Italy, see Blakesley (2014).

25 Anceschi (2004), 310.

26 Anceschi (2004), 310.

27 See De Robertis and Grilli (1958), 467–98.

stilistica" in Italy. His essay on the Greeks, which dates from 1910–1911 (but might have been written later than that), is a fierce critique of "realistic translations." Serra focuses on Giuseppe Fraccaroli's (1849–1918) "material" and "dramatic" (as opposed to "musical") translations of Greek lyrics (1910), lamenting his commitment to render solely the thematic content of the poetry. Serra ultimately puts the blame on Fraccaroli's approach to Pascoli's content-based cult of Greek lyricism as fostered in his introduction to *Lyra* (1895), one of Pascoli's very fortunate school anthologies. With a keen sense of cultural distance, Serra states that we are no longer capable of grasping the music of Greek originals. But that very music is the essence of poetry. Translations, therefore, should suggest the presence of something we cannot attain, something ineffable and secret that got lost and will never be retrieved.

Not only does Serra's essay anticipate Anceschi's innovative evaluation of Greek poetry, but it is a crucial moment in the historical trajectory of the classical legacy and in the critical reappraisal of Greek lyricism, which starts with Pascoli's translations of Sappho and culminates with Quasimodo's *Greek Lyrics*.

In an appendix to the volume, Quasimodo reminds us that his Italian renditions depart from the tradition of barbarian metrics (which, as we saw, was practiced by Carducci and, to some extent, by Pascoli and D'Annunzio) and from all academicism. His Greek lyrics originally speak in Italian measures, freeing themselves even from the structural obligation of replicating the same number of lines as in the original text. Only in this way can they speak poetically and mean something to the present – poetry being one with the present, even when it is expressed in translation. This is why translations should speak the language of the poet's present and avoid all imitation of outdated linguistic manners. As we read in the opening lines of the appendix, Quasimodo takes pride in himself for giving up all classicizing and aulic vocabulary. Interestingly, his example is a list of "sdrucchioli" – that kind of Latinate, dactyl-sounding vocabulary which most pleased, as we have seen, D'Annunzio's ear. But Quasimodo's vocabulary is remarkably plain, proudly removed from lofty registers or archaizing style. The point is to sound modern, not archaeological.

Quasimodo's translation of Sappho's famous poem *phainetai moi* (Fragment 31) is a telling instance of his linguistic modernity in translation. Although Sappho used various metrical forms, she is most famous for the characteristic four-line stanza which was to be named after her, and Fragment 31 is a representative example of it:²⁸

28 See Campbell (1982), 78–81, with translation: "He seems as fortunate as the gods to me, the man who sits opposite you and listens nearby to your sweet voice and lovely laughter. Truly that sets my heart trembling in my breast. For when I look at you for a moment, then

φαίνεται μοι κῆνος ἴσος θεοῖσιν
 ἔμμεν' ὤνηρ, ὅττις ἐνάντιός τοι
 ἰσδάνει καὶ πλάσιον ἄδου φωνεί-
 σας ὑπακούει

καὶ γελαίσας ἡμέροεν, τό μ' ἦ μὰν
 καρδίαν ἐν στήθεσιν ἐπτόαισεν
 ὥς γὰρ ἔς σ' ἴδω βρόχε', ὥς με φώναι-
 σ' οὐδ' ἐν ἔτ' εἴκει,

ἀλλὰ καὶ μὲν γλῶσσά <μ'> ἔαγε, λέπτον
 δ' αὖτις χροῦ πῦρ ὑπαδεδρόμηκεν,
 ὁππάτεσσι δ' οὐδ' ἐν ὄρημ', ἐπιρρόμ-
 βμεισι δ' ἄκουαι,

καὶ δὲ μ' ἴδρως κακχέεται, τρόμος δὲ
 παῖσαν ἄγρει, χλωροτέρα δὲ ποίας
 ἔμμι, τεθνάκην δ' ὀλίγω 'πιδεύης
 φαίνομ' ἔμ' αὖτ[α].

ἀλλὰ πὰν τόλματον ἐπεὶ †καὶ πένητα†

The first two stanzas in Quasimodo's translation of Sappho's poem are made each of three lines instead of four, as the canonical Sapphic strophe requires:

A me pare uguale agli dèi
 Chi a te vicino così dolce
 Suono ascolta mentre tu parli

E ridi amorosamente. Subito a me
 Il cuore si agita nel petto
 Solo che appena ti veda, e la voce

Si perde sulla lingua inerte.
 Un fuoco sottile affiora rapido alla pelle

it is no longer possible for me to speak; my tongue has snapped, at once a subtle fire has stolen beneath my flesh, I see nothing with my eyes, my ears hum, sweat pours from me, a trembling seizes me all over, I am greener than grass, and it seems to me that I am little short of dying. But all can be endured, since ... even a poor man ..."

E ho buio negli occhi e il rombo
Del sangue alle orecchie.

E tutta in sudore e tremante
Come erba patita scoloro:
E morte non pare lontana
A me rapita di mente.

[He appears equal to the gods
Who so near you such sweet
Sounds hears as you speak

And laugh lovingly. Immediately my
Heart is shaken in my breast
As soon as I see you, and my voice

Fails on my useless tongue.
Subtle fire rapidly comes through my skin,
And I have darkness in my eyes and the noise
Of my blood in my ears.

And all in sweat and trembling
Like suffering grass I become colourless:
And death does not appear to be far
From me estranged from my mind.]

In Quasimodo's translation, instead of four Sapphic stanzas, we end up having two tercets and two quatrains, that is, the reverse structure of a sonnet. And while the stanzaic setup may be reminiscent of such a canonical form as the sonnet, the individual lines are far from any recognizable regularity. Only line 6 is a hendecasyllable – interestingly, one with the main stress on the seventh rather than on the sixth syllable (which tends to be the norm in the Italian tradition). Quasimodo's version is indeed a telling instance of free verse. Vocabulary is plain. There are no literary or aulic words. Only three "sdrucchioli" are present: "súbito," "si ágita," and "rápido" – which, however, are rather common words.

Apart from purely linguistic strategies, Quasimodo's translations from the Greek turned out to be greatly instrumental in refreshing and revitalizing the classical legacy in Italy, liberating the notion of ancient poetry from the cumbersome shadows of fascistic rhetoric and scholastic inertia, and from

Carducci's, Pascoli's, and D'Annunzio's towering models. Quasimodo's *Greek Lyrics* have no educational purpose, nor do they mean to put any emphasis on precious or archaic diction. They are meant to just be "pure poetry" and bring new life to Italy's dormant lyricism.

Quasimodo ended up initiating a whole new wave of non-academic translations from Latin and Greek. He himself produced more poetic translations: from Virgil's *Georgics* (entitled *Il Fiore delle Georgiche*, 1942); from Catullus (1945); from the *Odyssey* (1945); from the *Greek Anthology* (1958); and from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (1959). He also translated ancient tragedies: Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* (1946) and *Electra* (1954), Aeschylus' *Libation Bearers* (1949), and Euripides' *Hecuba* (1962) and *Heracles* (1964). Quasimodo's translation of Catullus stands out as one of the best renditions of this Latin poet ever. Once again, clarity and freshness are the translator's stylistic guidelines. Like his *Greek Lyrics*, this is no complete translation, but an anthology. Indeed, the same is true of the majority of Quasimodo's translations, except for some individual Greek tragedies.

Quasimodo's very practice of rendering samples of works (the "fiore," as the title of the Virgil translation states) rather than complete works is as much grounded on Hermetic aesthetics as his choice of Greek lyrics. His selective translations from such a work as the *Greek Anthology* are obviously charged with metatextual resonance, almost working as a poetics in themselves.

6 Giuseppe Ungaretti, Eugenio Montale, and Umberto Saba: Rejecting Allegiance to the Classical Tradition

Unlike Quasimodo, the art and language of his most important contemporaries rejected all programmatic allegiance to the classical tradition. Two of them are Ungaretti and Montale, the master poets of the Italian Novecento (the 1900s). To be true, echoes of, and allusions to, ancient poets, such as Virgil and Horace, are not totally absent from their works. One of Montale's most celebrated opening lines, "Don't ask us for the word" [Non chiederci la parola] in his first collection *Cuttlefish Bones*,²⁹ is reminiscent of one of Horace's most celebrated incipits [Tu ne quaesieris, *Odes* 1.11], and allusions to ancient satire peep through his later collection *Satura* (1971).³⁰ This said, the reprise of Horace merely serves to enhance the epigrammatic force of Montale's own diction. It has no classicizing imitative purpose.

29 See above, p. 350. Montale (1998), 38–9.

30 See Confalonieri (2012).

Ungaretti attempted to revive Virgil's *Aeneid* in a late project, *The Promised Land* [La Terra Promessa], which – tellingly enough – remained unfinished (the subtitle is “Fragments: 1935–1953” [Frammenti: 1935–1953]). His use of Virgil is inherently metaphorical and allegorical. Again, nothing comparable to Pascoli's or Quasimodo's love for, and interpretation of, antiquity as such. In a sequence of nineteen lyrical snippets entitled *Choruses Describing Dido's State of Mind* [Cori descrittivi di stati d'animo di Didone], Dido personifies nostalgia, memory, and poetry – themes Ungaretti had already explored in his early poetry, ever since his debut with *The Buried Harbour* in 1916.³¹ Interestingly, neither Ungaretti nor Montale, who were active translators in their own rights, ever translated a line by an ancient poet. In the whole, the classical tradition appears not to have represented for such pivotal poets an essential model or a fully developed system of cultural and literary paradigms.

The same is true of another important poet, Umberto Saba (pseudonym of Umberto Poli, 1883–1968). Around 1914, Saba reworked a Greek poem by Herodas. It is a famous mime in which a desperate and somewhat sadistic mother asks the schoolmaster of her son, Cottalos, to punish him for playing truant and being a gambler. The master obeys and the son, having been beaten up, promises he will be a better boy. A lover of youths, Saba seasoned his adaptation of Herodas with homoerotic innuendos; he even intimated that Cottalos sold his body to some mariner. Interestingly, this poem was not included in Saba's collected poems, *Canzoniere*, along with other poems of obvious pederastic or homosexual content. Saba's choice of Herodas' verse was not dictated by any special interest in Herodas as an ancient poet. It simply afforded him the opportunity to compose a poem on a beautiful boy. Homosexuality is also behind the classical theme of two poems in the collection *Mediterranean Scenes* [Mediterranee] (1947): “The Rape of Ganymede” [Il ratto di Ganimede] and “Narcissus at the Fountain” [Narciso al fonte]. Once again, Saba used ancient sources that would allow him to celebrate young male beauty. In the *Mediterranean Scenes*, he also included a poem entitled “Ulysses” [Ulisse] – a theme perhaps also connected with his Jewishness (his own legally adopted surname Saba means “grandfather” in Hebrew).³² Ulysses is taken for a symbol of homecoming and self-fulfilment, against which the poet asserts his own never-ending quest for peace. This poem too should not be understood as a tribute to classical antiquity. Indeed, one can hardly argue that such a universal symbol of human struggle as Ulysses actually serves to conjure up Homer himself.

31 See above, p. 350.

32 Kerbel (2003), 905.

The point is that Saba, Ungaretti, and Montale were inspired by models other than those who meant so much for Pascoli or Quasimodo. For them, the classical tradition meant formulaic scholasticism, academic repetitiousness, and fascistic rhetoric, all but innovation and exploration of new ways. Quite peculiarly, Saba's "revolution" rested on a devoted, almost naïf reappropriation of such Italian poets as Leopardi and Petrarch. Saba was born in Trieste, then an Austrian city. The greatest authorities of Italy's lyricism – Leopardi and Petrarch – helped to Italianize his "foreignness." They legitimized and normalized him, appeasing his painful sense of linguistic and sexual alienation. A cosmopolitan poet, Ungaretti started off by rejecting all tradition in his early futurist days and then by turning to French models (from Mallarmé to Apollinaire), before he, too, imitated Leopardi and Petrarch. Unlike Ungaretti and the Hermetic poets of the Thirties, Montale found his models mainly in the English and American canon, from Shakespeare to Browning to Eliot (some of whom he wonderfully translated), while harking all the way back to Dante's rocky diction.

7 Pier Paolo Pasolini, Edoardo Sanguineti, and Andrea Zanzotto: The Classical Tradition as an Anti-Lyrical Antidote

After the Second World War things changed. The younger generation felt less threatened ideologically by, and therefore less prejudiced against, the ancient classics. While familiarity with Greek and Latin literature was not widespread among them, the classical legacy enjoyed a sort of post-Hermetic Renaissance thanks to such ingenious poets as Pier Paolo Pasolini (1922–1975), Edoardo Sanguineti (1930–2010), and Andrea Zanzotto (1921–2011). However profoundly different from one another, these poets shared an understanding of the classical tradition as an anti-lyrical antidote, proudly departing from Quasimodo's cult of the fragment. Their models were derived from tragic and narrative literature, and they were intended to endorse a kind of poetry that transcended the poet's subjective experience.

After attempting to translate bits of the *Aeneid* in 1959 (a translation which remained unpublished), Pasolini was mostly drawn to ancient theatre.³³ He translated parts of Sophocles' *Antigone*, completed a rendition of Aeschylus' *Oresteia* (1960) and Plautus' *Miles Gloriosus* (1963) for the theatre, and turned Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* (1967) and Euripides' *Medea* (1969) into films.³⁴ The

33 On Pasolini's Virgil, see Bernardelli (2015).

34 On Pasolini's *Antigone*, see Iannucci (2015); on Pasolini's *Agamemnon*, see Fusillo (2005).

choral dimension of tragedy offered a refreshing ideal of poetry as social dialogue and collective discourse, one which ultimately identified its historical paradigm in ancient myth. In a critical piece entitled “Letter of the Translator” [Lettera del traduttore], Pasolini described his translation work from Aeschylus as a process of de-sublimization, intended to liberate the voice of the ancient poet from all classicizing veneer and to treat it as everyday speech.³⁵

A militant avant-garde poet, Sanguineti translated numerous ancient dramas: Euripides’ *Bacchae* (1968) and *Trojan Women* (1974), Seneca’s *Phaedra* (1969), Aeschylus’ *Libation Bearers* (1978) and *Seven Against Thebes* (1996), Aristophanes’ *Thesmophoriazousae* (1979), Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex* (1980). His translation of Sophocles’ *Antigone* remained unfinished (1985). Sanguineti also translated Petronius’ novel *Satyricon* (1969), and passages from Lucretius’ *De rerum natura* (published in 2006, along with his translations of Shakespeare and Goethe).³⁶ All of the tragedies were commissioned by well-established theatre directors. The fact remains that Sanguineti’s appropriation of ancient literature added a highly significant chapter to the history of the classical legacy in contemporary Italy. Through the ancients, this subversive poet managed to hybridize the realm of modern poetry, mixing up genres (just like Lucretius bravely conflated poetry and philosophy) and disrupting stylistic homogeneity by means of a sort of Bakhtinian plurilingualism (characteristic of Petronius’ novel), as is also obvious from Sanguineti’s original poetry, starting from the challengingly experimental and polyglot collection *Laborintus* (1956).

Zanzotto stands out as a most proficient reader of Latin. His linguistic experimentation, which pushed Italian poetry to unrivalled levels of semantic disruption and conceptual abstraction (and even obscurity), cannot be understood outside the reference frame of his deeply historical appreciation of Latin as an unrelentingly active substratum of the Italian language.³⁷ Hence his etymological conundrums, his numerous quotations from all sorts of Latin sources, his neologisms, and his guiding, even structuring, idea of poetical language as flux. Zanzotto’s Latinate poetics had a supreme model in Virgil. In his vision, modern poetry – however defectively – perpetuates Virgil’s Arcadian dream, just like the Italian language derives from Latin and is ultimately the living death of Latin: the dream of a world in which poetry and nature create a harmonious whole. Indeed, after establishing himself as a late imitator of the Hermetic poets in his first two collections, *Behind the Landscape* [Dietro il paesaggio] (1951) and *Vocative* [Vocativo] (1957), Zanzotto suddenly shifted to radical experimentation with a book which was very much indebted to Virgil’s

35 In Pasolini (2001), 1007–9.

36 On Sanguineti’s Petronius, see Semprini (2015).

37 On Zanzotto’s Latin, see Gardini (2018).

bucolics, *IX Eclogues* [IX Ecloghe] (1962).³⁸ The eclogue – like Greek tragedy – provided a dialogic paradigm, because it stages conversations and song competitions between shepherds. Virgil's eclogues were ten. In Zanzotto's title, the number "nine" (IX) indicates the unachieved task of the modern poet, and ultimately the impossibility of the Arcadian ideal in the modern capitalistic world, where the beauty and sacredness of language are constantly subjected to semantic impoverishment and aesthetic disfigurement.

8 Giovanna Bemporad and the Question of Translation (Again)

I should like to conclude with Giovanna Bemporad (1928–2013) – a woman at last. Unlike the poets I have discussed so far, she never emerged as a particularly distinctive voice in the panorama of twentieth-century Italian poetry. Rooted in the Hermetic tradition, her poetical output is scant and not obviously original, either in themes or in style. A great admirer of Leopardi, she explored obsessively such themes as death, the end of youth, and loneliness. Some poems seem to mourn over the end of a homosexual love, but Bemporad never defined herself as a homosexual poet or person, although she liked to defy gender distinctions with her unusually masculine attires. Also, while entertaining close friendships with famous intellectuals and writers, including Pasolini, she remained remarkably detached from the official literary scene throughout her life. When she died, she was largely unknown. Her work is now receiving more critical attention, but her canonization is still far from being complete. Yet, when we have to deal with the classical tradition, Bemporad sticks out as a central point of reference. While she was interested also in French and German poetry and did translate a considerable number of French and German poets, her literary career mostly coincided with a passionate commitment to translate ancient classics. She started quite early, when she was only seventeen. Having taught herself Greek, she translated eight tragedies over one summer.³⁹

38 See Zanzotto (2007).

39 These are the Greek tragedies young Bemporad translated (these translations are still unpublished): Euripides' *Medea* (10–15 July 1940), *Iphigenia at Aulis* (27 July–3 August 1940), *Hippolytus* (3–8 August 1940), *Heracleidae* (23–26 August 1940), *Bacchae* (12–17 September 1940; here we know the approximate time when the translation was completed: "night" [notte]), Aeschylus' *Persians* (8 October 1940: the manuscripts are incomplete and we only know when the translation was started); Sophocles' *Electra* (10–20 October 1940) and Aeschylus' *The Libation Bearers* (here too the manuscript is incomplete: we are told that the translation was started on 21 October 1940). I take this information from Paoli (2017).

Bemporad had a sacred respect for the ancients, especially Homer. She felt possessed and inspired by them. Not only did she translate them, but she also memorized them and loved to perform them publicly, often impromptu, just like an ancient bard.⁴⁰

Bemporad made no conceptual difference between her original verse and her translations. Actually, translation was for her the ultimate form of poetry. Her first published volume included both poems and translations (from Homer, Sappho, and Virgil) and was tellingly entitled *Exercises: Poems and Translations* [Esercizi. Poesie e traduzioni] (1948). As was characteristic also of her translation works, this early volume was to be revised and republished a few times over the years: *Poems and Translations* [Poesie e traduzioni] (1963); *Exercises: Poems and Translations* [Esercizi. Poesie e traduzioni] (1980); *Old and New Exercises* [Esercizi vecchi e nuovi] (2010 and 2011).

Her celebrated rendition of the *Odyssey* gained her universal acclaim. The meter she used was the hendecasyllable – the very same meter of her own original verse –, which automatically positioned the text of the translation within the most canonical Italian tradition and totally outside the classicizing tradition à la Carducci or à la Pascoli. Interestingly, Bemporad's use of the hendecasyllable also departed from Quasimodo's practice of free verse. In the wake of Quasimodo's selective poetics, though, she too chose to translate only parts of the original. Nonetheless, Bemporad kept herself occupied with the selective rendering of the *Odyssey* for decades. Three editions appeared: in 1968, 1970, and 1992. The second and the third incorporated variants. Bemporad was still revising the text on the eve of her death.

Also her translation of the *Aeneid* appeared in three editions: in 1965, 1983, and 2000. This is a beautiful rendition of Virgil's poem. Bemporad's translation of the *Odyssey*, though, is far superior. One should not hesitate to call it a masterpiece. It is not just a splendid accomplishment in the history of classical translations in Italy, but it is a most successful piece of poetry in itself. Bemporad's use of the hendecasyllable appears extremely sophisticated; her vocabulary, syntax, and diction contribute equally to the happy flow of the narrative, aptly changing tones and colours according to the themes and managing to conjure up the linguistic loftiness of the original without sounding far-fetched or banally imitative.

As a matter of fact, when we refer to Bemporad's *Odyssey*, the term "translation" is inaccurate.⁴¹ This was, for her, a work in progress, a never-ending enterprise, an ongoing experiment, which intended to capture the very essence of

40 Videos of her highly idiosyncratic readings are available online.

41 See Rodighiero (2015).

Homer's semantics and thus strove to recreate the very soul of the original. Such a challenging task prompted the translator to redesign her linguistic options and solutions in an unrestrainable and endless self-emending process, while prompting her to search for poetry as such (Quasimodo's *tenet*, still), all linguistic specificity and differences notwithstanding. In the end, no version – no matter how accurate and painstakingly edited – could be considered definitive; it was only a provisional stage in a journey towards the ideal unachievable version: Poetry itself.

9 Conclusions

This chapter has provided an outline of the classical legacy in twentieth-century Italian poetry. We have started from foundational figures like Carducci, Pascoli, and D'Annunzio, and have then moved to Quasimodo's highly influential translation work and aesthetics. We have seen that such central authors as Montale and Ungaretti had no profound knowledge of, or keen interest in, ancient literature as such, something also true for Saba; and that the following generation (Pasolini, Sanguineti, Zanzotto, and Bemporad) started a whole new trend in the appropriation of classical models. However briefly, we have seen the crucial impact of ancient sources on the construction of Italy's modern poetry, the relevance of the classical legacy to public discussions on national identity, education, and literary language, and – above all – the multifaceted approach of Italy's poets to the Graeco-Latin past, mixing conservativeness and rediscovery, historical appreciation and mythologizing idealization, poetry and politics.

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Reimagining Catullan Poetics in Modern(ist) Japan

Nishiwaki's Ambarvalia and "Translatory" Acts

Akira V. Yatsushashi

Nishiwaki was indeed a Janus, always simultaneously seeing East and West, modern and ancient worlds, surrealism and haiku, the banal and the sublime.¹

Dear Mr Pound: At your kind suggestion we have officially made an application to the Swedish Academy for Dr. Junzaburo Nishiwaki as a Nobel prize candidate [...]²



Ambarvalia by Nishiwaki Junzaburō ([西脇順三郎] 1894–1982) was first published in 1933 and has been recognized as one of the key works of Japanese Modernism. Yet both in the Japanese and English literature on Nishiwaki the subsection of the collection entitled “Latin Elegies” has been generally neglected as consisting merely of translations of Latin texts. Focusing on one of these poems, “Catullus,” this chapter aims to reassess the significance of these “translations” and shed light on the reception of Catullus in modern Japan. Through a close reading of the poem, I will demonstrate that, contrary to what has been generally held, “Catullus” should not be dismissed as a mere translation from the Catullan corpus. Instead, it should be seen as a carefully crafted

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- 1 Hirata (1993a), xviii. When he sent Pound his Japanese translations of *Selected Poems of Ezra Pound*, Iwasaki Ryōzō ([岩崎良三] 1908–1976) accompanied them with an English poem by Nishiwaki (who had also written the introduction to the translations), entitled “January in Kyoto” and starting with the lines: “Janus, old man, / Your name is damp and grey and too prolonged, / A ring to rattle in my verse.” Interestingly (perhaps on Nishiwaki’s recommendation?), among Pound’s poems which were translated was “To Formianus’ Young Lady Friend” (after Catullus) (see below). Kodama (1987), 132–5.
 - 2 Letter (“September 9, 1957”) by Iwasaki. Kodama (1987), 143.

work that uses experimental poetic techniques, primarily borrowed from the West, in order to articulate and promote a new kind of Japanese poetry. The chapter thus touches upon the question of “international Modernism,” part of which is Pound’s later recommendation that Nishiwaki be a candidate for the Nobel Prize.

Ambarvalia is divided into two parts bearing the French titles “Le Monde Ancien” and “Le Monde Moderne.” Although it was Nishiwaki’s first creative work written primarily in Japanese, *Ambarvalia* was also his work most influenced by the Graeco-Roman world, one populated by shepherds and Graeco-Roman deities often set in a seemingly timeless Mediterranean landscape. However, the collection ultimately mixed ancient and modern poetic topics, tropes and techniques, something evident not only in the poems’ titles (for example, “The Head of Callimachus and the Voyage Pittoresque,” “A Picture Card Show, Shylockiade”), but also in the use of classically inspired poetic experiments, ranging from an original “Elegy” composed both in Latin and Japanese, to an *ekphrasis* of the Dionysus Kylix. Nishiwaki’s use of both ancient and modern literary themes and techniques from the West was groundbreaking given that the Japanese poetic scene had come into contact with the West less than a century earlier, and still possessed its own dominant and rigid tradition. Nishiwaki’s *Ambarvalia* explored the limits of the Japanese language through translation, or more accurately, “translatory” acts,³ creating a new form of literary Japanese full of lexical oddities, atypical syntax, and foreign loan words.

Although much has been written on Nishiwaki’s *Ambarvalia*, few scholars have paid adequate – if any – attention to a group of poems entitled “Latin Elegies,” situated at the heart of the work within its “Le Monde Ancien” section.⁴ In fact, three of the four poems of this subsection were thought to be merely translations from parts of the 1913 Loeb volume *Catullus, Tibullus, Pervigilium Veneris*.⁵ It is worth mentioning the reaction of one Japanese scholar, Kitagawa Fuyuhiko ([北川 冬彦] 1900–1990): having praised the poems and wondered

3 For the use of the term “translatory,” see Hirata (1993a), 197 and Hirata (1993b).

4 For English-language scholarship, see Hirata (1993a, esp. 45–67), Sas (1999), and Nishiwaki (2004). For Japanese scholarship, see Niikura (1979), (1982), and (2004); Sawa (2002) and (2015).

5 E.g., Willett (see Nishiwaki (2004), 43) and Hirata ((1993a), 223) characterize the poems as “partial translations” and do not translate them. Hirata ((1993a), 222) states: “I have omitted from my translations the entire ‘Latin Elegies’ section except his own poem ‘Elegy,’ for it consists of Nishiwaki’s translations of Latin poems by Catullus, Tibullus, and several anonymous poets.”

why they were unduly neglected, Kitagawa felt shocked upon learning that they were mere translations.⁶ Likewise, classical reception studies in the West have paid almost no attention to Latin poetry's reception in Asia and consequently Nishiwaki's "Catullus" has been almost totally ignored.⁷

1 *Ambarvalia* in Context

No other Japanese poet before Nishiwaki had tried to incorporate the Graeco-Roman past into their work in such an aggressive manner. Much like in Europe, in early twentieth-century Japan poets started to experiment with new poetic forms, despite the fact that traditional poetics was still dominant with its rigid forms and vocabulary. It is within this context that one must read Nishiwaki's collection. In fact, *Ambarvalia* was the first collection Nishiwaki wrote in Japanese, after having published *Spectrum* (1925), a collection of poems in English.⁸

Nishiwaki was a graduate of the Department of Economics at Keiō University, who had immersed himself in European literature and languages, including English, German, French, Greek and Latin. He famously wrote his graduation thesis on "Pure Economics" entirely in Latin, also providing a summary in Japanese, since no one in the department could read it. After spending some time working as a journalist, a banker, a government employee, and college instructor, Nishiwaki moved to England in 1922 to study English literature at the University of Oxford.⁹ During that *annus mirabilis* of Anglo-American literary Modernism, James Joyce's *Ulysses* and T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (which Nishiwaki was to translate into Japanese) were published.¹⁰ It was during the period he spent in England that Nishiwaki became familiar with

6 See Hirata ((1993a), 242 n. 5): Kitagawa Fuyuhiko first praised the poem in a 1957 essay on Nishiwaki; in a reprint of the essay, though, having learned that the poem was a translation, he added a note: "I must add here that when I was informed by Kinoshita Tsunetarō that Nishiwaki Junzaburō's 'Ambarvalia' was, except the last five lines, entirely his translation of a Latin poem, I felt as if my soul were expiring."

7 On Catullus more particularly, see, for example, Arkins (2007) and Vandiver (2007). Both scholars provide excellent and wide-ranging surveys of the American and European reception and translation of Catullus, which however do not encompass Catullus' reception and translations in the East. The same applies to Wiseman (1985) and Gaisser (2009).

8 Nishiwaki had also published privately another collection with poems in English (*Poems Barbarous*, Tokyo 1930) and attempted to publish a collection with poems in French (*Une Montre sentimentale*): see Hirata (1993a), 187.

9 For more details on Nishiwaki's life, see Hirata (1993a), xviii–xxv.

10 See Levenson (2017).

Modernism and published his first collection of poems, *Spectrum*, in London in 1925 – which was completely ignored at the time. Upon his return to Japan, in 1926, not only did he accept a position as an English professor at his alma mater, but he also embarked on applying what he had learned in Europe to Japanese poetry.

These influences are traced throughout the entirety of *Ambarvalia*, in which Nishiwaki blends techniques, themes, and styles drawn primarily from Western Modernism with elements pioneered by other twentieth-century experimental Japanese poets, such as Hagiwara Sakutarō ([萩原 朔太郎] 1886–1942).¹¹ Nishiwaki's aim – as outlined in his theoretical writing too – was to create a new Japanese poetic language. For example, the poem “Platter” is a description of the famous Dionysus Kylix – and the first Japanese *ekphrasis*, clearly alluding to and playing on a Western poem, Keats's famous “Ode on a Grecian Urn”:

皿

黄色い堇が咲く頃の昔、
海豚は天にも海にも頭をもたげ、
尖った船に花が飾られ
ディオニソスは夢みつゝ航海する
模様のある皿の中で顔を洗って
宝石商人と一緒に地中海を渡った
その少年の名は忘れられた。
麗な忘却の朝。

[Platter

Long ago when yellow violets bloomed,
Dolphins lifted their heads toward the heavens and toward the sea.
A boy sailed across the Mediterranean Sea with a gem merchant,
Washing his face in a decorated platter
In which Dionysus sailed, dreaming
On a sharp-pointed ship adorned with flowers.
That youth's name has been forgotten.
Oblivion's glorious morning.]¹²

11 See also below, p. 383 n. 48.

12 The translation is by Hosea Hirata ((1993a), 49). For the Japanese text I have relied on Nishiwaki (1993) and Nishiwaki (1995).

By applying these new and often radical poetic techniques, Nishiwaki sought to reimagine Japanese poetry in the same way that Pound sought to “make it new” – “it” being the culture of the past.¹³ Drawing on an array of European avant-garde writers, such as Pierre Reverdy (1889–1960) and Tristan Tzara (1896–1963), Nishiwaki illustrated his idiosyncratic poetic views in his 1929 essay *Surrealist Poetics* [Chōgenjitsushugi shiron].¹⁴ In it he boldly claimed that “human existence itself is banal” and that “poetry is a method of calling one’s attention to this banal reality [...]. Custom dulls the awareness of reality. [...] Thus our reality becomes banal.” What “makes reality exciting” is “the break with custom” or tradition; and this break is “not for the sake of destruction itself but for the sake of poetic expression.”¹⁵ Nishiwaki adds:

In order to create a metaphor or an association [...] a poet must join elements that are scientifically different in nature, or elements that are usually placed at the greatest distance from each other, temporally as well as spatially. Thus what he produces is an association absolutely impossible in terms of common sense. What Gourmont means by “dissociation” is this type of “association.”¹⁶

In *Ambarvalia* Nishiwaki joins “scientifically different” elements from the East and the West, antiquity and modernity, in order to create new types of poetic associations and metaphors and to “destroy,” as it were, the mimetic aspect of the poetic work. As Hirata explains:

In Nishiwaki’s view, artistic expression must be absolutely deliberate, artificial and non-natural – that is, essentially ironic. In this light, for Nishiwaki, Baudelaire becomes the first and primary exponent of what he calls the “legal” (legitimate) artist [...]. A poem, then, must be an intentionally artistic expression, disrupting the “natural” flow of feelings and thoughts, which constantly seeks to be represented most “truthfully.”¹⁷

Nishiwaki’s use of these “non-natural” techniques in *Ambarvalia* can be seen “as an effort to lose his authorial self as well as others’ authorship” through

13 I am not claiming that Nishiwaki was responding specifically to Pound’s volume of essays *Make It New*, which was published in 1935, that is, two years after the publication of *Ambarvalia*, but that he was influenced by Pound’s approach to translation; for the latter, see Kenner’s Introduction to Pound (1963), 9–14.

14 For the translation, see Hirata (1993), 5–43.

15 Hirata (1993a), 5.

16 Hirata (1993a), 8. See also Sas (1999), 14–18, 123–4.

17 Hirata (1993a), 155.

his translatory intervention.¹⁸ This artistic expression is clearly manifest in the opening poem of *Ambarvalia*, the four-line poem “The Song of Choricós.” Before turning to “Catullus” and its own programmatic character, I will look more closely at this poem that opens the collection’s first section, “Le Monde Ancien.”¹⁹

2 “The Song of Choricós” and Richard Aldington’s “Choricós”

In “The Song of Choricós” [コリコスの歌] Nishiwaki combines elements that are sharply different, Greece and Japan, ancient and new. He blurs the line between the two cultures, and even harmonizes them, by creating novel associations through dissociations, without privileging the foreign at the expense of the domestic cultural elements. The poem illustrates how Nishiwaki borrowed and blended ideas from many Western artistic movements in order to inform his own Japanese brand of Modernism:²⁰

コリコスの歌

浮き上がれ、ミウズよ。
 汝は最近あまり深くポエジイの中にもぐつてゐる。
 汝の吹く音楽はアビドス人は聞こえない。
 汝の喉のカーブはアビドス人の心臓になるやうに。

[The Song of Choricós]

O Muse, arise.
 Of late thou hast been submerged too deeply in Poesy.
 The music thou blowest forth reaches not the Abydos
 May the curve of thy throat be the heart of the Abydos.]²¹

Right from the beginning it is obvious that “The Song of Choricós” is not a typical Japanese poem. What first stands out is the title itself, which combines two disparate elements: on the one hand, the foreign word “Choricós” [コリコスの],

18 Hirata (1993a), 190.

19 See also Sas ((1999), 134–41), arguing that another poem in the collection, “A Fragrant Stoker,” first published separately in 1927, should be viewed as programmatic in the sense that it used techniques and ideas that would be typical of *Ambarvalia* as a whole. On Richard Aldington’s “Choricós,” see Vandiver, this volume.

20 I have classified Nishiwaki’s work as Modernist precisely because his ideas, even when they can be characterized as “Surrealist,” seem to borrow from a variety of Western avant-garde movements. For a fuller discussion, see Sas (1999).

21 The translation is by Hosea Hirata ((1993a), 47–67).

visually distinct since it is transcribed in *katakana*, the Japanese syllabary used for foreign words, and, on the other, the traditional Japanese character for song, *uta* [歌]. The use of contrasting elements dominates the whole four-line poem. Its first line brings the reader back to the beginnings of Western poetry with an invocation of the Muse – in all probability the first one in Japanese literature. Foreign loan words, such as “Poesy” [ポエジイ] (line 2) and “curve” [カーブ] (line 4), and technical Japanese terms more at home in a medical handbook, such as heart [心臓] and throat [喉] (again from line 4), are interwoven with language more congruent with the conventions of traditional Japanese poetry. The poem’s structure is also peculiar. The repetition of the character “thou” [汝], at the beginning of lines 2, 3, and 4, is wholly alien to traditional Japanese poetics. Evidently “The Song of Choricós” is a telling example of how Nishiwaki brings together “scientifically different elements” in order to break with established customs and conventions.

“The Song of Choricós” illustrates the key role played by translation, or more accurately, by “translatory writing,” in Nishiwaki’s poetics. For the poem is not entirely “original” but one based on Richard Aldington’s sixty-five-line poem “XOPIKOS” (later anglicized as “Choricós”), which started with the words: “The ancient songs / Pass deathward mournfully.” Aldington is most famously known as one of the founders of the Imagist movement, and his poem used elements drawn from the Graeco-Roman world in a thoroughly ironical Modernist manner; it thus brought the reader back to the earliest locus of song, at the same time making the ancient world “new.”²²

Aldington and his work were well-known in the West. “XOPIKOS” appeared in the November 1912 issue of the journal *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse*, the issue that launched the movement of Imagism. Poets like Aldington along with Ezra Pound and H. D. promoted a poetics that rejected the sentimentality of Romantic and Victorian poetry. Writing to the editor of *Poetry* Harriet Monroe, Pound summarized the Imagist aims as following: “Objective – no slither; direct – no excessive use of adjectives, no metaphors that won’t permit examination. It’s straight talk, straight as the Greek!”²³ Imagism abandoned traditional meters, and its adherents generally used free verse along with other experimental forms of verse, often borrowed from other cultures, including the Japanese.²⁴

22 For the relationship between Nishiwaki and the Imagists, see Niikura (1979), 147–63, and especially 147–51 for Nishiwaki’s “The Song of Choricós” and Aldington’s “XOPIKOS;” also Sawa (2002), 13–22.

23 Korg (2001), 128. See also Vandiver, this volume.

24 See Kodama (1987).

The invocation of the Muse in Nishiwaki's "The Song of Choricós," with the call to "arise" [浮き上がれ], or more literally "to float up," points to Aldington's reference to "daughters of Okeanos." Nishiwaki continues to play on Aldington's image, by employing the verb *moguru*, which can mean "to dive into" or "to bury oneself in" or "to hide oneself." By exploiting Aldington's aquatic imagery, Nishiwaki was tipping his hat to his poetic predecessor:

Symbols of ancient songs
Mournfully passing
Down to the great white surges,
Watched of none
Save the frail sea-birds
And the lithe pale girls,
Daughters of Okeanos.

ALDINGTON's "Choricós," lines 5–11

The use of "thou" in Nishiwaki's poem is also telling. The older Japanese form of "you" [汝] matches Aldington's "thou," and its repetition in three consecutive lines also imitates Aldington's deployment of the word (emphasis added):

O Death,
Thou art an healing wind
That blowest over white flowers
A-tremble with dew;
Thou art a wind flowing
Over long leagues of lonely sea;
Thou art the dusk and the fragrance;
Thou art the lips of love mournfully smiling;
Thou art the pale peace of one
Sate with old desires;
Thou art the silence of beauty,
And we look no more for the morning;

ALDINGTON's "Choricós," lines 46–57

A similar use of repetition is found in other poems in *Ambarvalia*.²⁵ As Sawa argues, like Aldington's "ΧΟΡΙΚΟΣ," Nishiwaki's "The Song of Choricós" has a programmatic nature, introducing a new type of poetics.²⁶

25 For example, in "Rain."

26 Sawa (2002), 16.

There is, however, a difference in the way the two poets view the poetic past. From Aldington's opening lines, "The ancient songs / Pass deathward mournfully. / Cold lips that sing no more and withered wreaths / Regretful eyes and drooping breasts and wings" (lines 1–4), one gets a mournful image of the poetic world where the neglected poetic voices slip into nothingness. Aldington even rounds off his poem with Death, "the illimitable quietude / Com[ing] gently upon us" (lines 75–76). The poem's melancholy tone can be seen as a call to save and revive poetry in new ways. Yet, in Nishiwaki's "The Song of Choricor," the invocation of the Muse, accompanied by the imperative "arise," is rather reminiscent of an epic poet. Right from the beginning, Nishiwaki appears to respond to Aldington's mournful poetic message by urging poets no longer to stay deeply submerged in *Poesy* but to come and speak to the people again. In the final line of the poem, through a vocabulary uncommon to poetic discourse ("curb," "throat" and "heart;" see above), Nishiwaki seems to make *Ambarvalia*'s first programmatic statement: "The Song of Choricor" brings the message of poetic revival for the people of Abydos, who, according to some scholars, stand for the people of Japan.²⁷

3 "Latin Elegies" and Translation

At the end of the "Le Monde Ancien" section of *Ambarvalia* Nishiwaki put the subsection "Latin Elegies," consisting of four poems: three "translatory" works inspired by Catullus, Tibullus, and the *Pervigilium Veneris*, entitled "Catullus," "Ambarvalia," and "The Eve of the Venus Festival" [ヴェーナス祭の前晩] respectively, and one original poem entitled "Elegy" which also involves translation: the poem was first written in Latin and then translated into Japanese by Nishiwaki; in the collection a "free" Japanese translation is put first, followed by the original Latin text and then its "literal" translation.²⁸

27 See Sawa ((2002), 15 and (2015), 29–30), also citing comments by the Surrealist poet Kitasono Katsue ([北園 克衛] 1902–1978). Niikura ((1982), 157) refers to Byron's poem, "The Bride of Abydos." It is beyond the scope of this chapter to deal with this matter, but it is worth mentioning that in the "Greek Lyrics" section of "Le Monde Ancien" there are several allusions to another British Romantic poet, John Keats, and his *Endymion*. See, in Japanese, Niikura (1982), and, in English, Hirata (1993a). Abydos was the best harbor on the Asiatic side of the Hellespont, featuring already in Homer; see *Oxford Classical Dictionary* (2012, 4th edn.), 1–2. In "Catullus" (see below), together with a reference to Propontis (Marmara), another city on the same side of the Hellespont appears, Lampsacus. Abydos is also the name of a prominent sacred ancient city in Upper Egypt.

28 Hirata (1993a), 189 and 223.

As mentioned, scholars who have worked on *Ambarvalia* have assumed that Nishiwaki essentially made these translations using the 1913 Loeb edition of Catullus, Tibullus, and the *Pervigilium Veneris*; as a result, these poems have been omitted from the translations of the collection into English.²⁹ Yet, a comparison with the Latin original shows that Nishiwaki's poems "Catullus" and "Ambarvalia" are much more than translations. "Catullus" is a poetic medley drawn from the Catullan corpus and beyond, clearly influenced by both Surrealist and Imagist poetics; and "Ambarvalia" (which also provides the name for the collection as a whole) is a select, free translation of Tibullus 2.1, a poem centered on the Roman festival of Ambarvalia. As for "The Eve of the Venus Festival," it consists of less creative, straight-forward translations of the first seven sections of the *Pervigilium Veneris*. The fact that this last poem was a translation in a more traditional sense makes "Catullus" and "Ambarvalia" stand out even more. It must also be noted that all three poems are translated in the form of prose poems and they are thus distinguished from the rest of the collection thanks to their dense appearance on the page.³⁰ Of the two "creative" translations, "Catullus" and "Ambarvalia," the former is the more innovative, whereas the latter seems to complement and expand upon the final part of "Catullus." It is for that reason that the remainder of this chapter will focus on "Catullus" and explore the poem's importance to the collection as a whole.

4 Nishiwaki's Catullus and Ezra Pound

If in the opening of "Le Monde Ancien" Nishiwaki turned to Aldington, in the subsection of "Latin Elegies" he seems to have turned to Ezra Pound.³¹ Nishiwaki's "Catullus" and "Ambarvalia" seem to mirror Pound's translatory efforts or adaptations in works such as *Homage to Sextus Propertius* (1919),

29 Both Hirata ((1993a), 223) and Niikura ((1979), 159) cite the Loeb edition. Niikura ((1982), 159) recognizes that they are based on translations of several poems but fails to note that they are loose translations and to identify all the source material, such as the Priapic poems. See also above, p. 365 n. 5.

30 One needs only to compare the "The Song of Choricor" with "Catullus;" see Appendix. In later editions Nishiwaki would add line breaks to the poems, much like the rest of the poems in the collection and would "normalize" the poetic style to some extent. For a further discussion on these matters, see Sas ((1999), 134–40), who compares the 1927 and 1933 versions of the poem "Fragrant Stoker," originally a prose poem too; see also above, p. 369 n. 19.

31 For more background on Latin elegy and its reception in Pound's work, see Zimmerman (2006).

Pound's major translation from Latin.³² But among the "miscellaneous poems" translated by Pound,³³ we also find a translation of Catullus 43, "To Formianus' Young Lady Friend – After Valerius Catullus," first published in Pound's collection *Lustra* in 1916.³⁴ Since Nishiwaki knew Pound's work well from the years he spent in England, it is reasonable to assume that he turned to Catullus precisely because Catullus was well known and appreciated in Modernist circles,³⁵ while at the same time he had not been treated poetically to the extent Sextus Propertius, for example, had. By turning to Catullus, Nishiwaki thus recognized his debt to Pound, while breaking new poetic ground for himself.

Pound and Nishiwaki seem to have approached the Latin texts for different reasons. Commenting on his *Homage*, Pound claimed that he turned to Propertius because he found in him a kindred spirit and a poetic voice that used irony and satire, which Pound could use "as a mask for the contemporary poet."³⁶ Nishiwaki, on the other hand, seems to have turned to Catullus not as a means to find a new persona *per se*, but as a means to remove the pretense of the actor behind the poetic mask and reclaim poetry as pure art.³⁷ His translation of Catullus shows how he tried to eliminate the mimetic aspects of Catullus' poetry, especially the expression of emotions, in order to celebrate an artistic expression that is "absolutely deliberate, artificial, non-natural – that is, essentially ironic."³⁸ One might detect here the influence of figures such as Arthur Symons, who had also translated Catullus and about whom Pound

32 Sullivan (1964) is still the fullest treatment of this work. See also Xie (1999).

33 See Pound (1963).

34 Later on Pound also translated Catullus 26 (1957) and 85 (1963) (Pound (1963), 408) and in 1936 he was working on his third (unfinished) opera *Collis o Heliconii*, settings of poems by Catullus and Sappho (Fisher (2005)). In *Lustra* we also find the poem "Lesbia Illa" (quoting the first line of Catullus 3: *Lugete, Veneres! Lugete, Cupidinesque!*; the title of the poem itself refers to Catullus 58); again in the poem "The Study of Aesthetics" (again in *Lustra*) we read: "For there are, in Sirmione, twenty-eight young / Dantes and thirty-four Catulli;" and in *The Spirit of Romance* (1910): "O pleasing shore of Sirmio, / White-shining hill of Catullus!" See also Arkins (2007), 466: "The most important figure in the reception of Catullus in the twentieth century is Ezra Pound."

35 For more on the connections between Pound and Nishiwaki, see Sawa (2002) and Niikura (2003). It is worth mentioning Yeats's famous poem "The Scholars," first published in 1915, which ends with the lines: "Lord, what would they say / did their Catullus walk that way?" See Arkins (2007), 472–3: "Yeats's famous poem about Catullus, 'The Scholars,' demonstrates his close association with Pound [...] mirror[ing] the sort of attack on the arid scholarship of classicists that is typical of Pound."

36 Pound (1994), 3.

37 See Hirata (1993a), 149–66, chapter "Pure Poetry and Reality."

38 See above, p. 368.

wrote: “We can but wonder if any man, in English, has better succeeded in finding the tone and idiom to render [Catullus] or his poetry.”³⁹

5 “Catullus” and Catullus

Note: Nishiwaki’s poem “Catullus” is a collection of translatory acts from different passages from the Latin original. In the close reading of the poem that follows below, I provide: a.) the original Japanese text, followed by b.) my own literal English translation; and c.) the original Latin text, followed by d.) the translation by F. W. Cornish (the 1913 Loeb edition),⁴⁰ except for Catullus 16 and two of the so-called “Priapeia” (or Catullus 19 and 20). In the case of those poems I use the prose translation by Leonard C. Smithers (the 1890 and 1894 Burton and Smithers editions; see also below). I have marked in italics the phrases that Nishiwaki translated or adapted from the Latin text. I have also included (in parentheses) the titles of the poems in the 1894 Burton and Smithers edition of Catullus’ *Carmina*.⁴¹

Like the title of the collection, *Ambarvalia*, the title of “Catullus” appears in Latin and is not transliterated. The poem begins not with Catullus 1, as one might have expected, that is, the dedicatory first poem of the Catullan corpus, but with the famous Catullus 2.⁴²

Catullus

雀よ、乙女は汝に戯れて、欠乏のかすかな悩みを医するものなれど、われにも汝と戯れしめよ、そして我が心の苦しみを軽くなさしめよ。(et *tristis animi levare curas!*) しかもアタランタの長くとざされたる帯をひもとく異色のアブリともなれ。

39 See Arkins (1990), 9–10. For Nishiwaki and Symons, see Hirata (1993a), xxi: “Of these [authors], Flaubert, Symons, and Pater left a lasting impression on the young man.” On Pater and *Ambarvalia*, see Hirata (1993a), 222: “Nishiwaki most likely found the word [‘Ambarvalia’] in *Marius the Epicurean* by Walter Pater (1834–94), one of his favorite writers.”

40 Cornish *et.al.* (1962).

41 In the Appendix the whole prose poem “Catullus” appears, together with my translation.

42 Nishiwaki treats Catullus 11 and 11A as a unity, as, for example, in the 1894 Burton and Smithers edition. For the reference to Atalanta in Catullus 11A, see Burton and Smithers (1894), 300.

[Sparrow, the young lady plays with you, and you cure the faint sufferings of absence. Might I play with you and thus lighten the pains of my heart. (et tristis animi levare curas!). May you also become the golden apple that loosened Atalanta's girdle tied for so long.]

CATULLUS II and IIA

[CATULLUS II – LESBIA'S SPARROW]

*Passer, deliciae meae puellae,
quicum ludere, quem in sinu tenere,
cui primum digitum dare appetenti
et acris solet incitare morsus,
cum desiderio meo nitenti
carum nescio quid lubet iocari,
credo ut, cum gravis acquiescet ardor,
sit solacium sui doloris,
tecum ludere sicut ipsa possem
et tristis animi levare curas!*

* * * * *

*Tam gratumst mihi quam ferunt puellae
pernici aureolum fuisse malum,
quod zonam soluit diu ligatam.*

[Sparrow, my lady's pet, *with whom she often plays* whilst she holds you in her lap, or gives you her finger-tip to peck and provokes you to bite sharply, whenever she, the bright shining lady of my love, has a mind for some sweet pretty play, in hope, as I think, that *when the sharper smart of love abates, she may find some small relief from her pain* – ah, might I *but play with you as she does, and lighten the gloomy cares of my heart!*

* * * * *

This is as welcome to me as *to the swift maiden was (they say) the golden apple, which loosed her girdle too long tied.*]

LOEB edn., trans. F. W. CORNISH

Nishiwaki starts his "Catullus" with Catullus' signature sparrow with which Catullus 2 begins. He then, however, skips the middle section of the original poem and proceeds to a section from the end of the poem, to which he seamlessly appends part of Catullus 2A. Instead of focusing on the narrator's personal response to the scene, Nishiwaki constructs a fragmented scene by briefly introducing the image of a young lady playing with her sparrow, before interpolating some of Catullus' original Latin and then ending with a mention

of Atalanta's girdle, the last part of Catullus 2A. By doing so, Nishiwaki lays bare the artificial nature of the poem and obscure, as it were, the narrator's identity, as he also omits references of the Latin text to the self, such as *desiderio meo*, *nescio*, and *possem* (lines 5, 6, and 9 respectively). Already in this first paragraph of Nishiwaki's poem, it becomes clear how he is going to apply his "artificial" poetics, by minimizing the mimetic and confessional tone of the original poems.

A new paragraph signals the move to Catullus 3:

あ！愛よ、悲しめ、しかし我が乙女の雀は死せり。雀は何人も帰らざる暗黒の地に行つた。残酷なるオルクスの暗さ。我が乙女の眼はいまは、泣き、赤く、ふくれてゐる。

[Ah!, Love, mourn, yet my young lady's sparrow is dead. The sparrow has gone to the land of darkness from which no one returns. The darkness of cruel Orcus. My lady's eyes are now full of tears, red, and swollen.]

CATULLUS III

[ON THE DEATH OF LESBIA'S SPARROW]

Lugete, o Veneres Cupidinesque,
et quantumst hominum venustiorum.
passer mortuus est meae puellae,
passer, deliciae meae puellae,
quem plus illa oculis suis amabat:
nam mellitus erat suamque norat
ipsam tam bene quam puella matrem;
nec sese a gremio illius movebat,
sed circumsiliens modo huc modo illuc
ad solam dominam usque pipiabat.
qui nunc it per iter tenebricosum
illuc, unde negant redire quemquam.
at vobis male sit, malae tenebrae
Orci, quae omnia bella devoratis:
tam bellum mihi passerem abstulistis.
vae factum male! vae miselle passer!
tua nunc opera meae puellae
flendo turgiduli rubent ocelli.

[Mourn, ye Graces and Loves, and all you whom the Graces love. My lady's sparrow is dead, the sparrow my lady's pet, whom she loved more than her

very eyes; for honey-sweet he was, and knew his mistress as well as a girl knows her own mother. Nor would he stir from her lap, but hopping now here, now there, would still chirp to his mistress alone. *Now he goes along the dark road, thither whence they say no one returns.* But curse upon you, *cursed shades of Orcus*, which devour all pretty things! My pretty sparrow, you have taken him away. Ah, cruel! Ah, poor little bird! All because of you *my lady's darling eyes are heavy and red with weeping.*]

LOEB edn., trans. F. W. CORNISH

As we saw, already in the “translation” of Catullus 2, Nishiwaki had skipped any details about how the beloved lady was playing with the sparrow and thus omitted much of the more sexually suggestive images – for example, playing with fingers or sitting on laps. In this paragraph, Nishiwaki removes much of the rhetoric that would build a close bond between the narrator and the reader. Once again, he merely provides highlights of the original text focusing on three major images: the death of the sparrow and its voyage to the underworld, the darkness of that underworld, and the sad state of the lady's eyes.

“Catullus” then moves to Catullus 4, providing what appears to be a summary of the twenty-seven-line original:

ビチユーニアより帰りしカトゥルスは彼の舟の航海の美しさをほめた。アドリアの海岸、アルキペラゴーの島々、トラキア、マルモーラ。

[Having returned from Bithynia, Catullus praised the beauty of the sailing of his ship. The Adriatic coast, the Archipelagos islands, Thrace, and Marmara.]

CATULLUS IV

[ON HIS PINNACE]

Phaselus ille quem videtis, hospites,
ait fuisse navium celerrimus,
neque ullius natantis impetum trabis
nequisse praeter ire, sive palmulis
opus foret volare sive linteo.
et hoc negat minacis *Hadriatici*
negare *litus insulasve Cycladas*
Rhodumque nobilem horridamque Thraciam
Propontida, trucemve Ponticum sinum
[...]

lines 1–9

[The pinnacle you see, my friends, says that she was once the fleetest of ships, and that there was never any timber afloat whose speed she was not able to pass, whether she would fly with oar-blades or with canvas. And this (says she) the *shore* of the blustering *Adriatic* does not deny, nor the Cyclad isles and famous Rhodes and the wild *Thracian Propontis*, nor the gloomy gulf of Pontus [...].]

LOEB edn., trans. F. W. CORNISH

Unlike his treatment of Catullus 2 and 3, in which he redirected the focus away from a strong first-person narrator and avoided the formation of a close bond between the narrator and the reader, in this part of his adaptation Nishiwaki completely removes the artifice of the poet-as-subject, by referring to Catullus by name (this time, unlike in the title, transliterated into Japanese) as a third person character. Furthermore, he only indirectly refers to some of the locations mentioned in the original Latin and depersonalizes them when, for instance, he substitutes “Archipelagos islands” (アルキペラゴーの島々) for “insulasve Cycladas,” removes any adjectives describing the locations, such as “minacis” and “horridam,” and then even removes places, like Rhodes, from his version altogether.

Nishiwaki goes on with translating the memorable opening lines of Catullus 5, only to depart, very soon and abruptly, from the Latin original and its personal and dramatic elements:

我がレズビアよ、生きて、愛さう。太陽はのぼり、沈むとも、我々は永遠の夜を通して眠るべし。数万年の接吻は年と共に数へられない。

[My Lesbia, let us live and love. The sun rises and sets, and we should sleep through the eternal night. The kisses of countless years cannot be counted like the years.]

CATULLUS v

[TO LESBIA (OF LESBOS – CLODIA?)]

Vivamus, mea Lesbia, atque amemus,

rumoresque senum severiorum

omnes unius aestimemus assis.

soles occidere et redire possunt:

nobis cum semel occidit brevis lux,

nox est perpetua una dormienda.

da mi basia mille, deinde centum,

dein mille altera, dein secunda centum,

deinde usque altera mille, deinde centum.
 dein, cum milia multa fecerimus,
conturbabimus illa, ne sciamus,
 aut nequis malus invidere possit,
cum tantum sciat esse basiorum.

[*Let us live, my Lesbia, and love, and value at one farthing all the talk of crabbed old men.*

Suns may set and rise again. For us, when the short light has once set, *remains to be slept the sleep of one unbroken night.*

Give me a thousand kisses, then a hundred, then another thousand, then a second hundred, then yet another thousand, then a hundred. Then, when we have made up many thousands, *we will confuse* our *counting*, that we may not know the reckoning, nor any malicious person blight them with evil eye, *when he knows that our kisses are so many.*]

LOEB edn., trans. F. W. CORNISH

One might ask here why Nishiwaki did not choose to imitate the famous repetitions in lines 7–10 of the original, especially since he had already used repetition in other poems.⁴³ Instead, he ignores them, as he does with the strong dramatic and personal voice of the phrase *da mi* (line 7), focusing on the images of the sun rising and setting and that of eternal night. Nishiwaki also depersonalizes the last line, replacing the acting subject, *malus*, who “knows” the number of kisses, with the more imagistic and impersonal: “The kisses of countless years cannot be counted like the years.” Once again, Nishiwaki disrupts the traditional narrative flow of the poem in favor of the objectivity of the image.

Up until this point in his “Catullus,” Nishiwaki stayed fairly close to the order of the sequence of Catullus’ poems. Yet in what follows a jump takes place from Catullus 5 to the (in)famous Catullus 16. Nishiwaki’s treatment of Catullus 16 in particular makes it clear that he did not rely solely on the Loeb edition, which included only “a fragment” of Catullus 16 (namely lines 1–6) and left the first line untranslated:

アウレーリウスとフリーユウスよ、汝等道楽者よ、我が詩が少し肉感享樂的であるために、我も亦卑猥であると判断するな。眞の詩人は自ら貞淑ならざるべからず。けれども詩は必ずしもさうであるべきではない。詩に味と美を与へるには、詩には多少の肉感の快美と卑猥尾籠なところがあるものとする。そして

43 For example, in “The Song of Choricós,” see above, p. 371.

髭のない少年のためでなく、放蕩の故老のこはくなつた筋肉に好色の刺戟を
与へるものとする。我が詩に数万の接吻を読み、我を女々しい者と汝等は
考へるが、よせ。

[Aurelius and Furius, you *profligates*, because my poems are a little *sensually hedonistic*, don't judge me as an *obscene*. A true poet must be chaste. His poems, however, should not necessarily be so. For a poem to have flavor and beauty, a little *sensual beauty* and *filthy indecency* must be added. Therefore, they are not for beardless youths, (but) they provide lustful excitement to the stiffened muscles of prodigal old men. Having read the countless kisses in my poems, you all think I am effeminate – stop it.]⁴⁴

CATULLUS XVI

[TO AURELIUS AND FURIUS IN DEFENCE OF HIS MUSE'S HONESTY]

Pedicabo ego vos et irrumabo,
Aureli pathice et cinaede Furi,
qui me ex versiculis meis putastis,
quod sunt molliculi, parum pudicum.
nam castum esse decet pium poetam
ipsum, versiculos nihil necessest,
qui tum denique habent salem ac leporem,
si sunt molliculi ac parum pudici
et quod pruriat incitare possunt,
non dico pueris, sed his pilosis
qui duros nequeunt movere lumbos.
vos, quod milia multa basiorum
legistis, male me marem putatis?
pedicabo ego vos et irrumabo.

[I will paedicate and irrumate you, *Aurelius the bardache* and *Furius the cinaede*, who judge me from my verses rich in love-*liesse*, to be their equal in modesty. For it behoves your devout poet to be chaste himself; his verses – not of necessity. Which verse, in a word, may have a spice and volupty, may have passion's cling and such like decency, so that they can incite with ticklings, I do not say boys, but bearded ones whose stiffened limbs amort lack pliancy in movement. You, because of many thousand kisses you have read, think me womanish. I will paedicate and irrumate you!]

trans. LEONARD C. SMITHERS

44 In this part of the Japanese, I have put certain key words in bold.

What immediately stands out is that Nishiwaki omits the key first line and tones down the descriptors of Aurelius and Furius, from *pathice* and *cinaede* to what I have translated as “profligate” [道楽者] but could also be translated as “playboy” or “debaucher.” In contrast to the vitriol of the original Latin, the Japanese word sounds stiff and nearly academic, which appears to be yet another of Nishiwaki’s attempts to tone down the personal pathos of the original and play with its register.

Unlike his treatment of most of the previous Catullan poems, of which he generally translates the first and last lines and omits the middle sections, in the case of Catullus 16 Nishiwaki engages with the main corpus of the poem. What seems to have attracted him is the fact that the poem deals with “poesy,” to which he had referred in the first poem of the entire collection, “The Song of Choricós,” as we saw. Catullus 16 comprises what has been regarded as Catullus’ metapoetic statements.⁴⁵ Nishiwaki makes clear that “Catullus” speaks of his own poetics, as it refers directly to the poet-speaker of the poem. We can see this in the use of the personal possessive pronoun “my,” *waga* [我が], in the translation of the Latin *versiculis meis*, “my poems” (line 3), which, unlike in the Latin original, is also repeated at the end of Nishiwaki’s poem. Although the Catullan statement that a poem, in order to achieve beauty and flavor, might include “sensual beauty” and “filthy indecency” [肉感の快美と卑猥尾籠] is adopted in “Catullus,” the poem itself does not employ the licentious language of the original, as it omits the latter’s opening and closing line.⁴⁶

If this is taken as a programmatic statement, what kind of poetry might Nishiwaki be referring to? By ending his translation of Catullus 16 meekly substituting “stop it” [*yose*, よせ] for the famous *pedicabo ego vos et irrumabo*, Nishiwaki disrupts the narrative to make a strong and playful statement that he not only wants to remove all traces of the natural, personal, and mimetic, but that this is a narrative construct at a key point of his poem.

After the adaptation of Catullus 16, Nishiwaki turns to Catullus Fragment 2, according to the Loeb edition, or Catullus 18, according to other editions, such as the Burton and Smithers one. As we will see, Nishiwaki must have seen the similarities between Catullus 16 and the figure of Priapus in other works attributed to Catullus.⁴⁷

45 The claim that Catullus 16 has a programmatic aspect is commonplace. For a recent treatment of this notion, see Lateiner (2007) and Krostenko (2007).

46 See also above, about the omission of the more suggestive parts of Catullus 3.

47 Uden ((2007), 23) states that “Martial adapted lines 7–11 of Catullus 16 as a law in his poem 1.35; to let his readers know that he got the joke, he ends his poem ‘there is nothing more disgusting than a castrated Priapus.’” Uden also argues ((2007), 2–3): “It is poem 16, though, in which Priapus figures most largely, and it is through this poem that we

プリアプスよ、汝に此の叢林を献ずる。汝はラムプサークスに汝の住地と森林をもつが。ヘレスポントの海岸は、特に牡蠣の名産地、その町々では汝を崇拜する。

プリアプスの歌をきけ。

[Priapus, I offer this dense wood to thee. Although thou have your residence and forest at Lampsacus. The coast of the Hellespont, especially the parts known for oysters, worships you in their cities.

Listen to the song of Priapus.]

CATULLUS fragment 2

[XVIII – TO PRIAPUS, THE GARDEN-GOD]

*Hunc lucum tibi dedico consecroque Priape,
qua domus tua Lampsacis quaque <silva>, Priape,
nam te paecipue in suis urbibus colit ora
Hellespontia ceteris ostreosior oris.*

[*This inclosure I dedicate and consecrate to thee, O Priapus, at Lampsacus, where is thy house and sacred grove, O Priapus. For thee specially in its cities the Hellespontian coast worships, more abundant in oysters than all other coasts.*]

LOEB edn., trans. F. W. CORNISH

The turn to Priapus can be seen as a link back to Catullus 16's last omitted line, inducing a sense of play or parody to the delight of the text's ideal reader – or even to its author, who was known to have been taking joy in things in unexpected ways.⁴⁸ Yet even here, Nishiwaki confounds expectations by selecting a

can best understand Priapus' significance in Catullus' poetry. Catullus focalizes his much written-upon pronouncements on art and life through the character of Priapus; the absurdity of what results, and its incongruity with major strands of the Catullan corpus, renders this viewpoint inherently ridiculous."

- 48 Hirata ((1993a), xxii) mentions an anecdote about how Nishiwaki, upon reading for the first time the famous Japanese modernist poet Hagiwara Sakutarō, could not stop laughing. Hirata comments: "Anyone who has ever been touched by the morbid sentimentality of Hagiwara would find it hard to conceive of a man laughing while reading *Tsuki ni hoeru*." It must be noted that "it was Hagiwara's new poetic language that made Nishiwaki envision the possibility of writing poetry in Japanese for the first time": Hirata (1993b), 48 and 53 (quoting Nishiwaki's own words: "It was Hagiware Sakutarō who taught me that we did not necessarily have to use elegant style to write poetry. I totally supported not only his use of language but also his naturalism. Before Hagiwara, Japanese poetry had been steeped in sentimental romanticism").

section that does not overtly play up the god's ithyphallic nature, and instead intends to delight by moving the work in a new poetic direction. In this part of the poem, as with the "stop it" [*yose*, よせ] at the end of his adaptation of Catullus 16, Nishiwaki signals a shift in narrative by departing from translating and by introducing his own voice in the exhortation: "Listen to the song of Priapus." Here he might allude to his own invocation of the Muse in "The Song of Choricor" (see above); but he also seems to be once again breaking the translatory "fourth wall" by inserting his voice into the narrative, yet again showing his readers another way of creating a sense of artificiality in the text.

In the next part of "Catullus," Nishiwaki finally moves to two poems from the corpus of poems based on Priapus, the *Priapeia*, attributed by some to Catullus.⁴⁹ The poems have also been attributed to Virgil,⁵⁰ but, as we saw, we can assume that in addition to the 1913 Loeb edition (which does not include these poems), Nishiwaki knew other editions as well, such as the notorious 1890 edition by Sir Richard Burton and L. C. Smithers (based on the volume *Priapeia, sive diversorum poetarum in Priapum Lusus*), which attributed these poems to Catullus.⁵¹ In 1894, after the death of Burton in 1890, Smithers also published *The Carmina of Catullus* with his (prose) and Burton's (verse) translations, in which the two Priapeian poems appear under Catullus 20 and Catullus 19.⁵² In his Introduction, Smithers wrote: "I claim for this volume that it is the first literal and complete English translation as yet issued of Catullus."⁵³ It is also worth noting that in the Thomas Wright's 1906 biography of Burton, two chapters were entitled "15th October 1888 to 21st July 1890. Working at the 'Catullus' and 'The Scented Garden'" and "The Priapeia."⁵⁴ What is certain and important for our discussion is that Nishiwaki based his "Catullus" on these Latin poems, which he treated as works by Catullus.

乾ける櫛の樹から刻まれた、我は、少年達よ、この地を育てた。我は花吹く
春の最初の産の輝いた花の花輪に、柔い穀物の柔い緑りの茎と耳に、飾れ

49 For more on the *Priapeia*, see Uden (2007) and Parker (1988).

50 For example, Nishiwaki's advisor at Oxford, H. W. Garrod, wrote a review of Vollmer's *Appendix Vergiliana for Classical Review* in 1911, which contained these same poems but attributed them to Virgil. For more on the relationship between Garrod and Nishiwaki, see Hirata (1993a), 7–8.

51 Cranstoun's edition of Catullus (1867) also included these poems; see also p. 382 n. 47, with Mueller (1870). For Burton and the Obscene Publications Act, see Colligan (2002).

52 In the Loeb edition (as in most editions of Catullus) there is a break in numerical sequence between 17 and 21.

53 Butler and Smithers (1894), xvi. Smithers also provides the previous translations of Catullus he had consulted, with special mention of Ellis (1871).

54 Wright (1906).

る。黄色い莖、黄色い罌子粟、青白い葫蘆、香ばしい林檎、影多い葡萄樹の下になつた赤い葡萄の実が我れに捧げられる。時には(このことは秘密にしてゐてくれないか)髭のある牡野羊と角足の牝野羊が我が祭壇を血をもつて汚される。(註 プリアプスの像は普通たち樹のまゝに刻まれて、手には鎌か、角杯か、すばらしく大きなphallusをもつてゐた。主として農園の神の一つであつた。) 旅人よ、汝は我を拜むべし、手を触れるな。罰の道具として、この荒々しいファルスが用意されてゐる。これで君の頭をなぐるぞ。

[*I was carved from the dried out wood of the Kashiwa tree; young men, I nurtured this land. I am decorated with a flower laurel of radiant flowers made from flowers blooming at the start of spring and also the tender green stalks and ears of tender green. Yellow violets, yellow poppy plants, pallid gourds, fragrant apples, and buds of grapes from below much-shaded grape tree are offered to me. At times (and could you please keep this a secret?) the blood of a bearded male goat and a curved legged female goat pollute my altar. (Note: Priapus' statue was usually carved from a standing tree, with a sickle or curved bowl in his hand and possessing a magnificent phallus. Mainly he was a god of the farm.) Traveler, thou shalt worship me, but don't touch. As a tool of punishment, this rough phallus is ready. With it, I will strike your head.*]

PRIAPEIA 87

[CATULLUS XX – TO PRIAPUS]

*Ego haec, ego arte fabricata rustica,
 ego arida, o viator, ecce populus
 agellulum hunc, sinistra, tute quem vides,
 herique villulam hortulumque pauperis
 tuor malasque furis arceo manu.
 Mihi corolla picta vere ponitur,
 mihi rubens arista sole fervido,
 mihi virente dulcis uva pampino,
 mihique glauca duro oliva frigore.
 Meis capella delicata pascuis
 in urbem adulta lacte portat ubera,
 meisque pinguis agnus ex ovilibus
 gravem domum remittit aere dexteram:
 tenerque, matre mugiente, vaccula
 deum profundit ante templa sanguinem.
 Proin', viator, hunc deum vereberis
 manumque sorsum habebis hoc tibi expedit,*

parata namque crux, sine arte mentula.

Velim pol, inquis: At pol ecce, vilicus
venit: valente cui revulsa bracchio
fit ista mentula apta clava dexteræ.⁵⁵

[I, O traveller, *shaped with rustic art from a dry poplar, guard this little field* which thou seest on the left, and the cottage and small garden of its indigent owner, and keep off the greedy hands of the robber. *In spring a many-tinted wreath is placed upon me; in summer's heat ruddy grain; [in autumn] a luscious grape cluster with vine-shoots,* and in the bitter cold the pale-green olive. The tender she-goat bears from my pasture to the town milk-distended udders; the well-fattened lamb from my sheepfolds sends back [its owner] with a heavy handful of money; and the tender calf, 'midst its mother's lowings, sheds its blood before the temple of the gods. *Hence, wayfarer, thou shalt be in awe of this god,* and it will be profitable to thee to *keep thy hands off. For a punishment is prepared – a roughly-shaped mentule. "Truly, I am willing,"* thou sayest; then, truly, behold the farmer comes, and that same mentule plucked from my groin will become an apt cudgel in his strong right hand.]

trans. LEONARD C. SMITHERS

PRIAPEIA 88

[CATULLUS XIX – TO PRIAPUS]

Hunc ego, o iuvenes, locum, villulamque palustrem
tectam vimine iunceo, caricisque manipulis,
quercus arida, rustica fomitata secure,
nunc tuor: magis, et magis ut beata quotannis!
Huius nam domini colunt me, deumque salutant,
pauperis tugurii pater, filiusque coloni:
alter, assidua colens diligentia, ut herba
dumosa, aspera que a meo sit remota sacello:
alter, parva ferens manu saepe munera larga.
Florido mihi ponitur picta vere corolla,

55 The Latin text of the two *Priapeia* poems used here is from the Burton and Smithers edition, based on the Mueller edition (reprint 1885; orig. 1870): see Burton and Smithers ((1894), xv). Mueller edition (in its 1892 reprint) was also used by Ezra Pound for his *Homage to Sextus Propertius*; see Sullivan (1964) 109–71; Kenner (1971), 170: “the *Homage* resembles selected passages of Propertius because Pound had Müller’s edition (1892) open in front of him. Transformation, translation, their systematic deformations, are themselves in the Pound Era foci of attention.”

*primitu', et tenera virens spica mollis arista:
 luteae violae mihi, luteumque papaver,
 pallentesque cucurbitae, et suaveolentia mala,
 uva pampinea rubens educata sub umbra.
 sanguine hanc etiam mihi (sed tacebitis) aram
 barbatus linit hirculus cornipesque capella:
 pro queis omnia honoribus haec necesse Priapo
 praestare, et domini hortulum, vineamque tueri.
 quare hinc, o pueri, malas abstinete rapinas.
 vicinus prope dives est, neglegensque Priapus.
 inde sumite: semita haec deinde vos feret ipsa.*

[*This place, youths, and the marshland cot thatched with rushes, osier-twigs and bundles of sedge, I, carved from a dry oak by a rustic axe, now protect, so that they thrive more and more every year. For its owners, the father of the poor hut and his son, – both husbandmen –, revere me and salute me as a god; the one labouring with assiduous diligence that the harsh weeds and brambles may be kept away from my sanctuary, the other often bringing me small offerings with open hand. On me is placed a many-tinted wreath of early spring flowers and the soft green blade and ear of the tender corn. Saffron-coloured violets, the orange-hued poppy, wan gourds, sweet-scented apples, and the purpling grape trained in the shade of the vine [are offered] to me. Sometimes, (but keep silent as to this) even the beaded he-goat and the horny-footed nanny sprinkle my altar with blood: for which honours Priapus is bound in return to do everything [which lies in his duty], and to keep strict guard over the little garden and vineyard of his master. Wherefore, abstain, O lads, from your evil pilfering here. Our next neighbour is rich and his Priapus is negligent. Take from him; this path then will lead you to his grounds.*]

trans. LEONARD C. SMITHERS

Once again, Nishiwaki does not translate the Latin in a straightforward manner but selects and combines sections from two poems. Three things are worth noting:

First, Nishiwaki describes the rituals of the ancient Romans removing much of the supplemental pastoral details and exploring folk traditions, something he will do further in his next poem “Ambarvalia.”⁵⁶ It is worth returning here to the opening, and programmatic, poem of *Ambarvalia*, “The Song of Chóricos,”

56 For more on Nishiwaki's approach to folk traditions, see Sawa (2015), 18–20.

and its mention of the “people of Abydos,” and recalling that for the Surrealist Japanese poet, Kitasono, Abydos stood in for Japan, since both Abydos and Japan are primarily agrarian societies, also connected to the sea.⁵⁷ Applying this remark to “Catullus,” we can add that both ancient Mediterranean, Greek and Latin, and Japan produced ithyphallic rural figures and similar rituals. Nishiwaki seems to have explored the role of these rituals in the origins of song.

Second, Nishiwaki employs the poetic technique of prosopopoeia. In this part of the poem an extensive use of the first-person pronoun “I” [*ware*, 我] is made, which in Japanese, like in Greek and Latin, is unnecessary and only adds emphasis. In this part of the poem, Nishiwaki chooses to stress the narrator’s voice, that is exactly what he had avoided in his “translations” so far. The fact that this voice belongs to a Priapus statue can only be seen as a parody of the genre Nishiwaki supposedly imitates.

Third, Nishiwaki interpolates a note in a parenthesis, namely: “(Note: Priapus’ statue was usually carved from a standing tree, with a sickle or curved bowl in his hand and possessing a magnificent phallus. Mainly he was one god of the farm).” In this way, the first-person narrative is interrupted, a gesture further adding to the parodic element and artificiality of poetic expression.

In the final paragraph of his “Catullus,” Nishiwaki returns to the canonical poems of Catullus, and more precisely to poem 31:

スイルミヨよ、半島と島の輝ける眼よ、再び君を訪れるとは、なんと喜ばしいことである。遠い旅につかれて帰つて来て、このソープアにかけるとは、チューニアやビチューニアの野を去つて、再び君を見るとは夢の気持である。

[Sirmio, shining eyes of the peninsula and islands, visiting you again what a joyous thing it is. Exhausted and tired from a long journey, sitting on this sofa, having left the plains of Thynia or Bithynia, it feels like a dream seeing you again.]

CATULLUS XXXI

[ON RETURN TO SIRMIO AND HIS VILLA]

*Paene insularum, Sirmio, insularumque
ocelle, quascumque in liquentibus stagnis
marique vasto fert uterque Neptunus,
quam te libenter quamque laetus in viso,*

57 See above, p. 372 n. 27.

vix mi ipse credens *Thyniam atque Bithynos*
liquisse campos et videre te in tuto.
 o quid solutis est beatius curis,
 cum mens onus reponit, ac *peregrino*
 labore *fessi* venimus larem ad nostrum
 desideratoque *acquiescimus lecto*?
 hoc est, quod unumst pro laboribus tantis.
 salve, o venusta Sirmio, atque ero gaude:
 gaudete vosque, o Lydiae lacus undae:
 ridete, quicquid est domi cachinnorum.

[*Sirmio, bright eye of peninsulas and islands*, all that in liquid lakes or vast ocean either Neptune bears: how willingly and with *what joy I revisit you*, scarcely trusting myself that I *have left Thynia and the Bithynian plains*, and that I see you in safety. Ah, what is more blessed than to put cares away, when the mind lays by its burden, *and tired with labour of far travel* we have come to our own home and *rest on the couch* we longed for? This it is which alone is worth all these toils. Welcome, lovely Sirmio, and rejoice in your master, and rejoice ye too, waters of the Lydian lake, and laugh out aloud all the laughter you have in your home.]

LOEB edn., trans. F. W. CORNISH

In the last part of his “Catullus,” Nishiwaki once again brings together ancient Mediterranean and Japan, stressing the image of peninsulas and islands (Sirmio, modern Sirmione, is a narrow rocky point at the south end of the Lago di Garda),⁵⁸ and focuses, on the one hand, on the end of the journey, the return or *nostos*, and, on the other hand, on the idea that the whole work was a dream. Nishiwaki thus rounds off his poem with a blurring between reality and dream representative of his Modernist poetics as he had expressed it four years before the publication of *Ambarvalia*, in his 1929 essay *Surrealist Poetics*.

6 Conclusion

In the subsection of “Latin Elegies” in *Ambarvalia*, “Catullus” is followed by Nishiwaki’s translation of Tibullus 2.1, a poem which documents the rituals of the Roman Ambarvalia festival. With this “translation” too, Nishiwaki further

⁵⁸ See also above, p. 374 n. 34, for Pound’s reference to Sirmio and Catullus.

establishes what he had set out in “Catullus”: namely, his tendency of stressing the more impersonal aspects of a body of poetry which had been well known hitherto exactly for the strong personal voice of its narrators. With “Catullus” and “Ambarvalia,” Nishiwaki makes it clear that he is not concerned with actually translating the original. Instead, he wants to use these poems as a means of expressing his own thoughts on poesy, at the same time providing an actual example of that type of poetry. In so doing, Nishiwaki does his best to erase the confessional and mimetic or dramatic aspects of the poet-narrator and replace it with artificial, non-natural, and ironical imagistic poetics. The poem “Catullus” is programmatic and metapoetic. Nishiwaki removes the Catullus known to classicists and replaces him with a “truer” form of poetry, establishing a new poetic language that makes “the author-subject disappear into the ‘porous’ text and where the forms of the works themselves come to the fore. Catullus disappears, Tibullus disappears, Goll disappears, and essentially so does 西脇 [Nishiwaki].”⁵⁹

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59 Hirata (1993), 191. In the “Le Monde Moderne” section of *Ambarvalia*, Nishiwaki included “Renka,” a translation of “Poèmes d’amour” by the French-German poet Yvan Goll (1891–1950).

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Appendix

Nishiwaki Junzaburō

Catullus

雀よ、乙女は汝に戯れて、欠乏のかすかな悩みを医するものなれど、われにも汝と戯れしめよ、そして我が心の苦しみを軽くなさしめよ。(et tristis animi levare curas!) しかもアタランタの長くとざされたる帯をひもとく異色のアプリともなれ。

あ！愛よ、悲しめ、しかし我が乙女の雀は死せり。雀は何人も帰らざる暗黒の地に行つた。残酷なるオルクスの暗さ。我が乙女の眼はいまは、泣き、赤く、ふくれてゐる。

ビチューニアより帰りしカトゥルスは彼の舟の航海の美しさをほめた。アドリアの海岸、アルキペラゴの島々、トラキア、マルモラ。

我がレズビアよ、生きて、愛さう。太陽はのぼり、沈むとも、我々は永遠の夜を通して眠るべし。数万年の接吻は年と共に数へられない。

アウレーリウスとフリーユウスよ、汝等道楽者よ、我が詩が少し肉感享樂的であるために、我も亦卑猥であると判断するな。真の詩人は自ら貞淑ならざるべからず。けれども詩は必ずしもさうであるべきではない。詩に味と美を与えるには、詩には多少の肉感の快美と卑猥尾籠なところがあるものとする。そして髭のない少年のためでなく、放蕩の故老のこはくなつた筋肉に好色の刺戟を与えるものとする。我が詩に数万の接吻を読み、我を女々しい者と汝等は考へるが、よせ。

プリアプスよ、汝に此の叢林を献ずる。汝はラムプサークスに汝の住地と森林をもつが。ヘレスポントの海岸は、特に牡蠣の名産地、その町々では汝を崇拜する。

プリアプスの歌をきけ。

乾ける櫛の樹から刻まれた、我は、少年達よ、この地を育てた。我は花吹く春の最初の産の輝いた花の花輪に、柔い穀物の柔い緑りの茎と耳に、飾れる。黄色い莖、黄色い罌子粟、青白い胡蘆、香ばしい林檎、影多い葡萄樹の下になつた赤い葡萄の実が我れに捧げられる。時には(このことは秘密にしてみてくれないか)髭のある牡野羊と角足の牝野羊が我が祭壇を血をもつて汚される。(註 プリアプスの像は普通たち樹のまゝに刻まれて、手には鎌か、角杯か、すばらしく大きなphallusをもつてゐた。主として農園の神の一つであつた。)旅人よ、汝は我を拝むべし、手を触れるな。罰の道具として、この荒々しいファルスが用意されてゐる。これで君の頭をなぐるぞ。

スィルミヨよ、半島と島の輝ける眼よ、再び君を訪れるとは、なんと喜ばしいことである。遠い旅につかれて帰つて来て、このソーファにかけるとは、チューニアやビチューニアの野を去つて、再び君を見るとは夢の気持である。

Sparrow, the young lady plays with you, and you cure the faint sufferings of absence. Might I play with you and thus lighten the pains of my heart. (et tristis

animi levare curas!). May you also become the golden apple that loosened Atalanta's girdle tied for so long.

Ah!, Love, mourn, yet my young lady's sparrow is dead. The sparrow has gone to the land of darkness from which no one returns. The darkness of cruel Orcus. My lady's eyes are now full of tears, red, and swollen.

Having returned from Bithynia, Catullus praised the beauty of the sailing of his ship. The Adriatic coast, the Archipelagos islands, Thrace, and Marmara.

My Lesbia, let us live and love. The sun rises and sets, and we should sleep through the eternal night. The kisses of countless years cannot be counted like the years.

Aurelius and Furius, you profligates, because my poems are a little sensually hedonistic, don't judge me as an obscene. A true poet must be chaste. His poems, however, should not necessarily be so. For a poem to have flavor and beauty, a little sensual beauty and filthy indecency must be added. Therefore, they are not for beardless youths, (but) they provide lustful excitement to the stiffened muscles of prodigal old men. Having read the countless kisses in my poems, you all think I am effeminate – stop it.

Priapus, I offer this dense wood to thee. Although thou have your residence and forest at Lampsacus. The coast of the Hellespont, especially the parts known for oysters, worships you in their cities.

Listen to the song of Priapus.

I was carved from the dried out wood of the Kashiwa tree; young men, I nurtured this land. I am decorated with a flower laurel of radiant flowers made from flowers blooming at the start of spring and also the tender green stalks and ears of tender green. Yellow violets, yellow poppy plants, pallid gourds, fragrant apples, and buds of grapes from below much-shaded grape tree are offered to me. At times (and could you please keep this a secret?) the blood of a bearded male goat and a curved legged female goat pollute my altar. (Note: Priapus' statue was usually carved from a standing tree, with a sickle or curved bowl in his hand and possessing a magnificent phallus. Mainly he was one god of the farm.) Traveler, thou shalt worship me, but don't touch. As a tool of punishment, this rough phallus is ready. With it, I will strike your head.

Sirmio, shining eyes of the peninsula and islands, visiting you again what a joyous thing it is. Exhausted and tired from a long journey, sitting on this sofa, having left the plains of Thynia or Bithynia, it feels like a dream seeing you again.

Andalusia and Antiquity

Classical Culture in the Poetry of Federico García Lorca

Federico Bonaddio

In an interview in 1934, Federico García Lorca (1898–1936), who was born and spent his early childhood in the Vega of Granada, spoke of his love for the land and, in particular, of his fascination with the furrowed fields surrounding his first home in Fuente Vaqueros.¹ As a child, he liked to watch how ploughshares turned the soil, producing cuts from which “roots rather than blood” spilt forth.² On one occasion, he recalls, a plough was stopped in its tracks by something solid concealed in the earth. This time the shining blade unearthed not roots but a Roman mosaic that bore an inscription he could not quite remember, although now, for some reason, the names of the shepherd and shepherdess Daphnis and Chloe sprang to mind. What Lorca called his first moment of “artistic wonder,”³ at the tender age of eight, was literally tied to the land, as were the figures he cited from the ancient Greek romance.

Lorca's anecdote is significant for at least two reasons. First, it exemplifies the ease with which Lorca was able to incorporate references to classical culture into a scene from his rural Andalusia. The fact that, in this case, the classical reference is prompted by an actual archaeological find is meaningful also because it identifies Andalusia as a very real site of antiquity. Classical references are not, of course, unusual in the broader context of European Modernism to which Lorca's work belongs. Modernism, like other artistic modes and movements before it, inevitably drew on the classical tradition. Yet, as we will argue in this chapter, in the case of a southern European poet whose relationship to a canon shaped by central and northern European production was never straightforward, the engagement with classical culture serves – indeed legitimizes – a specifically local agenda.

¹ Abbreviations used: *OC* = Federico García Lorca (1986) *Obras completas*, ed. Arturo del Hoyo, 3 vols., 22nd ed. Madrid: Aguilar.

² *OC* iii.600. All translations from Spanish into English are my own, although I have used Christopher Maurer's translations in Lorca (2002) as a point of reference for my translations of the poetry.

³ *OC* iii.600.

Secondly, the story that Lorca tells enacts, at both literal and metaphorical levels, a movement from concealment to revelation. In doing so, it touches, perhaps inadvertently, upon the tension between the two, which characterizes much of Lorca's work, irrespective of whether we locate the origin of this tension in the poet's reluctance or inability to speak openly of his sexuality or, as my own work has done, in the dominant artistic modes of the 1920s, which privileged "dehumanized" art (in José Ortega y Gasset's words; *La deshumanización del arte*) or (in Eliot's words) "the extinction of personality" over earnest self-expression, in the endeavor to assert the independence of art vis-à-vis external reality.⁴ The fact that what should be revealed in Lorca's story is an artifact inscribed with allusions to yet another story is telling in itself. It evokes the way in which the poet's own work, in employing classical myth as both a narrative device and a means of defending its constructions from intrusive emotions, is also doubly removed from reality. Although in this same interview of 1934 Lorca relates it specifically to his theatrical works (and, in particular, his rural tragedies) and to that aspect of his work which has been called his "agricultural complex,"⁵ the story also has something to say about the character of his work more generally, including his poetry.⁶

Delving deeper into the implications of his ploughshare anecdote, we aim to move beyond simplistic binary oppositions that cast Lorca either as a poet of the people or an erudite Modernist, or indeed as simply a combination of the two, and illustrate how his world view resists such labels altogether. We will show how Lorca's work represents a challenge to conventional paradigms that is as evident in his reading of the Spanish Renaissance poet Luis de Góngora (1561–1627) as it is in his reminders to us of the place of the classical tradition in Andalusia's hybrid culture. Indeed, by dealing with the Andalusian (and, by inference, Mediterranean) roots of classical culture, Lorca's work – no less aligned with the goals of the literary avant-garde –, stands in defiance of the cultural appropriations of the hegemonic north, be it Castile or Northern Europe, including its claims to exclusivity when it comes to defining the idea of modernity. Lorca's interest in his local culture was not tantamount to localism but rather was attached, as William Washabaugh has noted, to a sense of "mythic universality."⁷ It is with this sense of mythic universality, as we will show, that Lorca's engagement with classical culture was also bound up. This

4 See in particular Bonaddio (2010); and Bonaddio, F. (2022), 1–7.

5 OC iii.600.

6 For a treatment of the classical influences on Lorca's rural tragedies, see Rosslyn (2000).

7 See Washabaugh (2012), 67.

engagement equally served his self-conscious exploration of the vital matter of impersonality in art.

1 Classical Culture, Góngora, and Cante Jondo

It is possibly because his work has for so long been associated in the popular imagination with Spanish folklore, specifically the folklore of Andalusia, that critics have found it necessary to remind readers that Lorca was actually very knowledgeable about classical culture. In his treatment of the place of Lorca's oeuvre in the culture of male homosexuality, Ángel Sahuquillo contends that "Lorca knew more about [Greek] myths than what is generally known" and suggests that "the myths that most interested him were, for obvious reasons, the ones that had some connection with homosexuality."⁸ Again, Andrew A. Anderson, in his examination of Lorca's 1935 elegy to a bullfighter, *Lament for Ignacio Sánchez Mejías* [*Llanto por Ignacio Sánchez Mejías*], tells us that "Lorca was clearly aware of the classical myths, the early Iberian bull cults, and the wider prehistory or precursors of [bullfighting] in classical and other ancient rituals" and that his brother, Francisco, had "recounted how Hesiod's *Theogony* was one of Lorca's favorite books."⁹ And Nil Santiáñez, in a preamble to his explication of Lorca's "Ode to Salvador Dalí" [*Oda a Salvador Dalí*] (1926), after reminding us of the irritation Lorca famously expressed in a letter of 1927 to the poet Jorge Guillén at being labelled a "gypsy poet," argues that not only must Lorca have read widely, given the complexity and range of sources in his oeuvre, but that he might also have been familiar with the odes of Pindar, Horace, and their modern imitators.¹⁰ Santiáñez cites testimonial evidence (the poet's brother again) that Lorca knew Plato's dialogues and the work of (and here the poet is speaking for himself in a conversation with Ana María Dalí) Homer, Hesiod, Anacreon, Bion, and Aeschylus.¹¹

It might seem justifiable to see the need to emphasize Lorca's classical credentials as reflecting the view that only an association with highbrow culture can properly legitimize Lorca's place in the pantheon of great, Modernist artists. And yet this would mean to attribute to classical culture a value which does not cohere with Lorca's vision, as well as to ignore Modernism's synthetic character and its "resolution of the opposition between highbrow and low," as

8 Sahuquillo (2007), 112.

9 Anderson (1990), 161.

10 Santiáñez (2000), 592–3.

11 Santiáñez (2000), 593.

Washabaugh puts it.¹² That said, in Lorca's early work (in what we might call his years of apprenticeship – and here we are thinking of numerous poems from his first (1921) collection *Book of Poems* [Libro de poemas]; see also below), it is not difficult to see why classical references (often imitating the use of classical referents by *Modernismo*, a movement originating in Latin America with roots in Parnassianism and Symbolism and influential in Spain in the early 1900s) might be considered a form of highbrow cultural name-dropping. In this category might fall, for example, the various references to Pegasus, which had become a stock symbol of poetic inspiration: “And why will only the children see her, / astride Pegasus?” [¿Y por qué la verán solo los niños / a lomos de Pegaso?];¹³ “Mosquitoes – Pegasi of the dew” [Los mosquitos – Pegasos del rocío];¹⁴ “seed without the future of Pegasus” [el semen sin futuro de Pegaso];¹⁵ or even the direct reference to Anacreon: “you are from Anacreon's fields, / filled with the blood of immortality” [sois de los prados de Anacreonte, / llenos con sangre de lo inmortal].¹⁶

Yet by the time Lorca comes to write his aforementioned letter to Guillén in 1927, his frustration with his reception derives not, I would contend, from any self-conscious regret about the popular content of his work per se, with its typically Andalusian referents, but rather from his exasperation with others' inability to recognize the character and value of local, popular culture or its relevance to contemporary artistic endeavor. In fact, the vision of art Lorca developed eschewed simplistic distinctions between high- and lowbrow culture. This is evident, for example, in his 1926 lecture on Luis de Góngora and, before that, in his 1922 lecture on *cante jondo*, flamenco deep song.¹⁷

Lorca's 1926 lecture “The Poetic Image of Don Luis de Góngora” [La imagen poética de Don Luis de Góngora] is a defense of the Cordoban poet whose work had achieved notoriety for its complexity and, some might argue, obscurantist character. Lorca places Góngora firmly in the camp of cultured and courtly (as opposed to popular) poets, those who, as he puts it, rather than write their poetry “out on the road” do so “sat at their desks, watching the road

12 Washabaugh (2012), 64.

13 OC i.28, in the poem “Sad Balad” [Balada triste] (1918).

14 OC i.75, in the poem “The Sun Has Set” [Se ha puesto el sol] (1920).

15 OC i.109, in the poem “Dead Black-Poplar” [Chopo muerto] (1920).

16 OC i.149, in the poem “The Billy Goat” [El macho cabrío] (1919). Also in the same poem: “Father Pan taught you well! / [...] Ancient Greece / would have understood. / [...] You were born with Philommedes” [¡bien aprendiste / del padre Pan! / [...] Grecia vieja / te comprenderá. / [...] Nacisteis juntos con Filommedes].

17 See OC iii.195–216 and 223–47 respectively.

through the leaded glass of their windows.”¹⁸ Yet, he does make a point of relating the Cordoban’s erudite images to the tropes that can be found in the everyday language of Andalusia. Lauding the refinement of the metaphorization that occurs in common Andalusian tropes, Lorca characterizes it as “entirely Gongorine.”¹⁹ By way of illustration, he cites the image *buey de agua* (water ox), which is commonly used to denote a deep, powerful, yet slow-moving current;²⁰ and *lengua del río* (river’s tongue), a trope Lorca claims he heard a laborer from Granada employ to refer to a place in the river where water reeds like to grow.²¹ Both of these images, Lorca suggests, are very close to Góngora’s way of seeing.

Lorca’s defense of Góngora was intended, in great part, to assert his own credentials as a creator of pure poetry, namely poetry that stands independently from the world of reality and has its own, internal logic. “Naturally,” Lorca says of Góngora, “[the poet] does not create his images on the subject of Nature itself, but rather takes an object, thing, or act to the dark chamber of his brain from where they re-emerge transformed.”²² Góngora’s poetry is not “direct” and therefore cannot be read “against the objects of which it speaks.”²³ Instead, the “spiritual Cordoban’s poplars, roses, shepherds and seas are invented and new.”²⁴ Interestingly, Lorca’s affinity with Góngora extended to a common interest in classical culture, which provided not only exemplary models of poetic craft but also (in Lorca’s case, via mythology) a means by which to sever ties with immediate reality. Lorca tells us that, bored by his contemporaries and tired of “local color,” Góngora found solace in the elegant verse of Virgil.²⁵ Moreover, in the voices of his fellow Cordobans Seneca and Lucan, he found an alternative to the medieval tradition, to the chivalresque, and thus crafted his baroque verse “in the cold light of the lamp of Rome.”²⁶

If in the lecture on Góngora Lorca reminds us that classical culture and popular, rural language are both part of the Andalusian heritage, in his lecture on *cante jondo*, on the other hand, the focus is on India’s contribution to this heritage since flamenco deep song has its roots there. The Orientalist and primitivist character of the connection Lorca draws between *cante jondo* and what he

18 OC iii.224.

19 OC iii.224.

20 OC iii.224.

21 OC iii.224.

22 OC iii.235.

23 OC iii.235.

24 OC iii.235.

25 OC iii.228.

26 OC iii.226.

calls “the primitive musical systems of India” – a connection which further distinguishes *cante jondo* from other and more recent forms of flamenco, which Lorca calls *cante flamenco* – is clear not only in his definition of *cante jondo* but also in the way he associates it with natural sounds such as birdsong or the sound of water.²⁷ In Lorca’s account there is something primordial about flamenco deep song, and certain characteristics, such as the constant use of a single note, might even suggest that it predates the spoken word. “It comes,” Lorca explains, “from distant races, crossing the cemetery of the years and the foliage of withered winds. It comes from the first cry and the first kiss.”²⁸ Despite its pre-linguistic origins, its lyrics are characterized by complex metaphors which display the most profound poetic sensibilities. “It is strange but marvelous how the anonymous poet of the people extracts in just three or four lines all the rare complexity of the most intense emotional moments in the life of man.”²⁹

While some see in Lorca’s lecture on *cante jondo*, as well as in the *Concurso del cante jondo* (an international flamenco competition he helped the composer Manuel de Falla organize in 1922), a misguided attempt to elevate this popular genre to the status of high art,³⁰ his representation of *cante jondo* is arguably an example of a synthesizing view in which distinctions between high- and lowbrow are less relevant than the artistry shared by artistic products from different milieus. For this reason, we should not be surprised to find a reference to classical culture in his lecture on *cante jondo*. Conflating the Sibyl with the Sphinx of the myth of Oedipus, Lorca emphasizes the tragic character of *cante jondo*, where Love and Death are envisaged in the prophecies of the Sibyl – whom Lorca calls “the true Sphinx of Andalusia” and whose verse is akin to the riddles Oedipus had to solve at the entrance to Thebes.³¹ Lorca likens the songs of *cante jondo* to poems containing “the terrible question that has no answer,”³² poems that “either present a deep emotional problem, without a solution, or resolve it with Death, which is the question of all questions.”³³ Elsewhere I have suggested that the Oedipus of Lorca’s lecture corresponds to the figure of the poet himself, in part because it is he who sets about solving the mysteries of *cante jondo* for his audience.³⁴ This idea might also be extended to encompass the poet as a creator and, by implication, a solver of poetic

27 OC iii.197.

28 OC iii.204.

29 OC iii.205.

30 See, for example, Mitchell (1994), 164–8.

31 OC iii.205–6.

32 OC iii.205–6.

33 OC iii.206.

34 Bonaddio (2010), 44–7.

riddles, in line with contemporary poetic practice in which metaphorical, even playful, constructions tend to dominate. But whatever meaning we attribute to Oedipus, what seems apparent is that, for Lorca, the invocation of classical myth in a lecture on Andalusian folklore is no more out of place than the references to popular idiom in his treatment of Góngora (see above). What Lorca admires in Góngora is the same thing he admires in popular verse, namely linguistic ingenuity; and if Góngora “shuns easy expression,” it is “not out of love of highbrow culture, or because he was a highly cultured spirit;” nor is it out of hatred of the commoner, as he himself possessed the common “in great measure;” it is rather because he sought to create a framework, a poetic architecture, that might survive the ravages of time; in other words, it was “out of a preoccupation with eternity.”³⁵

2 Preoccupation with Eternity, Western Civilization, and Andalusia

The preoccupation with eternity, in its various guises – including reflections on mortality, origins, and tradition –, provides a thematic line through Lorca’s two lectures as well as a context for his references to classical culture and his engagement with the classical tradition. For what greater reassurance could there be in face of one’s own mortality than the evidence of posterity provided by the enduring appeal of this ancient culture? Moreover, this is a culture with which Lorca asserts a very special relationship precisely because it is part of Andalusia’s cultural heritage. If his engagement with classical culture confounds conventional oppositions between low- and highbrow, it is also because it reminds us that classical culture is not the preserve of Western civilization where this is a byword for northern and central European culture, but it has its roots in the Mediterranean, in southern Europe. This is doubly important for Lorca’s work, not only because he and other southern European writers and artists have been seen as marginal within Modernism, but also because he has also been seen, as Stephen Hart puts it, as “peripheral to the discourse of modernity.”³⁶

While not in itself a guarantor of modernity, the engagement with classical culture or the classical tradition does serve to challenge notions of center and periphery, not least because of the combination of its canonical character and yet indisputably southern origins. This is key, given that Lorca’s attachment to Andalusia was seen by some as a limitation rather than a virtue and provided

35 OC iii.246.

36 Hart (2007), 425.

a reason for treating his work as antithetical to modernity. We only have to consider Salvador Dalí's and Luis Buñuel's by now infamous criticism of Lorca's *Gypsy Ballads* [Romancero gitano] (1928): they judged the collection to be clichéd and too attached to the commonplaces of its Andalusian locality to be properly considered modern.³⁷

Alice J. Poust, by contrast, detects in Lorca's representation of Andalusia, in *Gypsy Ballads* and elsewhere in his oeuvre, a distinct desire not to perpetuate its image as being "out of step with modernity."³⁸ Poust sees "certain key similarities between the poet's cultural ideas and the cultural theory formulated by Oswald Spengler in *The Decline of the West*," understanding Lorca's work as reinterpreting Andalusia "not as a backward hinterland of Western or 'Faustian' culture, to use Spengler's term, but as part of an essentially different 'Magian' culture."³⁹ In this respect, for Poust, "Lorca's portrayal of Andalusia in *Gypsy Ballads*, *Deep Song*, and *Divan of the Tamarit* tends to align Andalusia with a contemporary tendency to question and even oppose the construct 'Western civilization.'"⁴⁰ Lorca's positive view of traditional Andalusian culture "is not attributable [...] to an anomalous traditionalism in an otherwise progressive thinker."⁴¹ Instead, "it is due to Lorca's sense that the cultural tradition to which Andalusia belongs might provide a counterpoint and, indeed, an alternative to the 'Western' civilization whose values had come into question in the nineteenth century and particularly as a result of the destruction wrought by World War I."⁴² "In a sense," adds Poust, "Lorca's views of culture are consonant with his aesthetics."⁴³

The un-European aspects of Lorca's vision of Andalusia are similarly foregrounded by Sharon Handley, who aligns it with that of the nineteenth-century writer Ángel Ganivet (1865–1898).⁴⁴ Ganivet's emphasis on Spain's Arabic influences was markedly different from the idea that Spain was innately European – the presiding view of Spain's so-called Generation of 1898, which included the prominent thinker and writer (and professor of Greek language and literature) Miguel de Unamuno (1864–1936). The distinction is significant because it pits, to cite the Hispanist Herbert Ramsden (as Handley herself does), a "religious and artistic" Spain, "a land of high ideals and individual, often impulsive

37 On Dalí's and Buñuel's criticism of *Gypsy Ballads*, see Gibson (1989), 216–17, 220–1.

38 Poust (2001), 175.

39 Poust (2001), 175.

40 Poust (2001), 175.

41 Poust (2001), 176.

42 Poust (2001), 176.

43 Poust (2001), 176.

44 See Handley (1996).

actions," against a "Europe north of the Pyrenees" that is "materialistic and scientifically minded, the home of practical aims and collective enterprises."⁴⁵ The distinction is, of course, simplistic, and what is actually at stake is the value of identity beyond the binary oppositions which privilege certain cultural traits over others. "The key to Lorca's view of the Andalusian identity," insists Handley, "lies in its hybrid heritage," to which we can find allusions throughout Lorca's work.⁴⁶ Part of this hybridity is classical culture which informs even the most typical practices of Andalusian folklore, such as popular song, dance, and the bullfight. "Whereas the 98 Generation mocked the popular song and dance (and bullfights) of the Andalusian [people]," writes Handley, "Lorca underlined their role as modern analogues of the rituals of ancient Greek tragedy and other Mediterranean rites. Furthermore, they provided him with evidence of the tragic nature of the [soul of Andalusia]."⁴⁷ Handley sees in the *Concurso del cante jondo* of 1922 a significant turning point, which can best be understood against the background of the 98 Generation's promotion of Castile as the authentic soul of Spain, an internal counterpoint to Spain's other identities, including those of the south and the Mediterranean, and a surrogate for the external, hegemonic north. "From the time of the *Concurso* of 1922," explains Handley, "Lorca promoted Andalusia in his work in such a way that his native land became a serious literary topos on a par with Castile in the work of many members of the 98 Generation."⁴⁸ In this sense, "the *Concurso* and the events surrounding it represented the beginning of a new *andalucista* movement which promoted Andalusia rather than Castile as the essence of Spanishness, emphasizing the hybrid nature of the Spanish identity rather than its uniformity."⁴⁹

Lorca continued to promote Andalusian culture well after his involvement with the *Concurso*, and there are numerous pronouncements which testify to this fact. In a letter from New York to his family in June 1929, he wrote that he would almost certainly be giving some recitals of popular Spanish music the following winter (he was an accomplished pianist as well as a poet and playwright), adding that it would be "good publicity for Spain and above all for Andalusia."⁵⁰ At a talk he gave in New York, in 1930, he praised the dancer, Antonia Mercé, also known as *La Argentina*, who was then performing in the city. Her "extremely personal art" was, in his view, at once "creative,

45 Handley (1996), 49.

46 Handley (1996), 52.

47 Handley (1996), 53.

48 Handley (1996), 51.

49 Handley (1996), 51.

50 *OC* iii.835.

inventive, indigenous and universal.”⁵¹ In his words for *La Argentina*, he recalled Andalusia’s classical heritage, suggesting that the dancer possessed “the grace of those dancers of Cadiz who were already famous in Roman times and danced at imperial festivals.”⁵² He also took it upon himself to write an introduction for the dancers Pilar López and Rafael Ortega, who in 1935 were performing in the auditorium of Madrid’s famous student residence, known simply as the *Residencia de Estudiantes*. In it, he emphasized the performers’ renown which extended beyond Andalusia to the capitals of Spain and even France.⁵³

3 *Poema del Cante Jondo* and Mythic Universality

There was no contradiction between Lorca’s interest in his local culture and a personal outlook that extended beyond southern Spain to the rest of the country and far beyond. At the 1928 launch of the literary magazine *Gallo*, published in Granada under his editorship, Lorca presented the magazine as a means to showcase indigenous talent to the rest of Europe.⁵⁴ The magazine – and the poet – had their eyes turned to the world, and, in that sense, the venture was emphatically anti-localist and anti-provincialist. So too was Lorca’s view of local popular culture. While his approach was no less patriotic than that of the late nineteenth-century anthropologist and folklorist Antonio Machado y Álvarez (also known as Demófilo), Lorca was, according to Washabaugh, “more faithful to mythic universality than to the localism of Demófilo,” where “mythic universality” relates to a utopian quest for meaning, for “a sense of fraternal collectivity” – a quest in which Modernism, and especially Cubism and Surrealism were involved – “in a world gone completely mad.”⁵⁵

It is in this context that we can understand Lorca’s collection *Poem of the Deep Song* [*Poema del Cante Jondo*], written in 1921, which applies a modern aesthetic to its age-old, folkloric subject. In an interview of 1931, when the collection was finally published, Lorca made a point of praising what he called the “purity” of Andalusian music, seeing in it a “Cubist instinct” that gave rise to sharp, if capricious, lines like arabesques.⁵⁶ This description characterizes the aesthetic endeavor of many of the poems of the collection which are in essence

51 OC iii.479.

52 OC iii.479.

53 See OC iii.416–17.

54 See OC iii.409–12.

55 Washabaugh (2012), 67.

56 OC iii.504.

attempts to provide graphic representations of the songs of *cante jondo*. There are also classical references, and these, I would suggest, are evidence of the way in which Lorca's sense of mythic universality is built both on a recognition of Andalusia's broad heritage and on his conviction that the spirit of its music can have an impact beyond the region and even beyond Spain. Just as the poetry which is inherent in popular language and popular culture contests simplistic oppositions between high- and lowbrow, so Andalusia's heritage cuts across both temporal and national boundaries, on the one hand emphasizing commonalities in the form of a shared past, while, on the other, confounding views of Andalusia and its culture as being marginal, outdated, or irrelevant. Thus, in the poem "Seville" [Sevilla], from a section in the collection devoted to the *saeta* (a religious song associated with Holy Week) [Poema de la saeta], the contradiction inherent in the mixture of religiosity and revelry which characterizes the Easter celebrations in the city is conveyed by a combination of both Andalusian and classical archetypes:

[...]
 Y loca de horizonte,
 mezcla en su vino,
 lo amargo de Don Juan
 y lo perfecto de Dionisio.
 [...] ⁵⁷

[And maddened by the horizon,
 she mixes in her wine,
 all the bitterness of Don Juan,
 and the perfection of Dionysus.]

The fervor in the city, which is located on the broad plain of the River Guadalquivir, is conveyed in terms of her heady, vinous mix of sin, regret (Don Juan), and Bacchanalian expression (Dionysus).

In another section entitled "Flamenco Vignettes" [Viñetas flamencas], the flamenco singer Juan Breva, in the poem bearing his name, is exalted by a comparison with Homer which emphasizes the value of vocality unhindered by sight: "Like Homer he sang / blind" [Como Homero cantó / ciego].⁵⁸ Elsewhere, in the poem "The Riddle of the Guitar" [Adivinanza de la guitarra], one of six poems denoted "caprices" [Seis caprichos], the sound hole of a guitar is

⁵⁷ OC i.181.

⁵⁸ OC i.204.

pictured as a golden Cyclops in possession of six damsel strings, in a conceit in which Andalusian folklore and classical myth are entwined:

En la redonda
encrucijada,
seis doncellas
bailan.
Tres de carne
y tres de plata.
Los sueños de ayer las buscan,
pero las tiene abrazadas
un Polifemo de oro.
¡La guitarra!⁵⁹

[At the round
crossroads,
six damsels
dance.
Three of flesh
and three of silver.
Yesterday's dreams search them out,
but in his embrace
a Polyphemus of gold has them.
The guitar!]

In yet another *capricho*, entitled “Prickly Pear” [Chumbera], it is this cactus – a stock figure of the Andalusian landscape – that undergoes a process of classicization:

Laoconte salvaje.

¡Qué bien estás
bajo la media luna!

Múltiple pelotari.

¡Qué bien estás
amenazando al viento!

59 OC i.217.

Dafne y Atis,
saben de tu dolor.
Inexplicable.⁶⁰

[Wild Laocoön.

How well you are
beneath the crescent moon!

Multiple pelota player.

How well you are
threatening the wind!

Daphne and Attis,
know of your pain.
Inexplicable.]

The association of the prickly pear with the Trojan priest Laocoön may have its origins in an ancient sculpture: the group representing Laocoön and his sons, attributed to Athenodoros of Rhodes, the outline of which resembles a wild cactus.⁶¹ The multitudinous pears attached to the cactus give rise to the connection with the Basque ball game *pelota*. Each fruit is a ball thrown and struck by the cactus which has, within the logic of the conceit, metamorphosed into a *pelota* player, a *pelotari* (or is it the player who has metamorphosed into the plant?). The image recalls the tree metamorphoses of classical mythology. Mirroring this metamorphosis, we have Daphne and Attis: the first transformed by the gods into a laurel tree so that she may escape Apollo's unwanted advances; the second, a Phrygian deity, reborn as a pine after his murder near the evergreen.⁶²

The poem "Prickly Pear," though brief, exemplifies the mythic universality of Lorca's work, the strategic importance of which is signaled by Handley in the context of the *Concurso del cante jondo* of 1922 (see above). Handley refers to the event as a "striking example of the desire to place Andalusia on the international cultural stage," a "campaign [...]" by Federico García Lorca, Manuel de

60 OC i.220.

61 See the edition of *Poema del Cante Jondo* and *Romancero gitano* by Josephs and Caballero (1984), 202, n. 1.

62 See Jobes (1961), i.154.

Falla and others to rediscover authentic *cante jondo* and expound its importance not only to the Spanish heritage (living proof of the oriental dimension and an example of [eternal tradition]), but also to the international music scene (influenced by composers such as Glinka, Debussy and Ravel).⁶³ Lorca's poems on *cante jondo* also serve to remind us of the importance of deep song to Spain's cultural heritage, and do themselves have an international dimension because of the transnational character of this heritage and because their aesthetic goals cohere with those of European Modernism. As "Prickly Pear" demonstrates, the mythic universality of Lorca's work is allied to the aesthetic principles underpinning impersonal art. For implicit in the mythological transformations of "Prickly Pear" – whether it be Daphne's and Attis' metamorphoses, or Lorca's own mythic construction which has Laocoön and his sons transform into a prickly pear (to escape the sea serpent?) – is a release from emotional turmoil that is tantamount to the eradication of emotionalism en route to creating "dehumanized" art; in other words, to the precedence given to (rational) metaphorical construction over personal, lyrical expression. This is why Daphne and Attis are able to understand Laocoön's pain in a poem governed by the twin principles of metaphorization and metamorphosis. Based on another artwork, and thus twice removed from reality, the poem privileges visual associations over the discursive, human stories connected with any of the figures. The final, single-word line, "Inexplicable," reminds us that the poem invents rather than explains, and that, importantly, this invention subsumes the original voices which are necessarily lost in the transformation.

4 Myths of Metamorphosis and Impersonality in Art

Lorca's preoccupation with transmuting personal emotion into impersonal art surfaces early in his work, finding its expression in the myth of Daphne and Apollo. What follows is an extract from the 1919 poem "Invocation to the Laurel" [Invocación al laurel] from *Book of Poems*, in which the poet's exclamatory tone and effusive lament are confronted by the principle of silence embodied here by the laurel tree:

[...]
 ¡Oh laurel divino, de alma inaccesible,
 siempre silencioso,
 lleno de nobleza!

63 Handley (1996), 50.

¡Vierte en mis oídos tu historia divina,
tu sabiduría profunda y sincera!

¡Árbol que produces frutos de silencio,
maestro de besos y mago de orquestas,
formado del cuerpo rosado de Dafne
con savia potente de Apolo en tus venas!

¡Oh gran sacerdote del saber antiguo!
¡Oh mudo solemne cerrado a las quejas!
Todos tus hermanos del bosque me hablan,
¡sólo tú, severo, mi canción desprecias!

Acaso, ¡oh maestro del ritmo!, medites
lo inútil del triste llorar del poeta.
Acaso tus hojas, manchadas de luna,
pierdan la ilusión de la primavera.
[...]⁶⁴

[O divine laurel, whose soul is inaccessible,
always silent, full of nobility!
Pour into my ears your divine history,
your profound and sincere wisdom!

Tree that produces fruits of silence,
master of kisses and magician of orchestras,
formed of the pink body of Daphne
with the potent sap of Apollo in your veins!

O great priest of ancient wisdom!
O solemn mute closed to complaints!
All your brothers of the wood speak to me.
Only you, severe one, despise my song!

O master of rhythm! Perhaps you think on
the futility of the poet's sad lament.
Perhaps your leaves, marked by the moon,
will lose their hope for spring.]

64 OC i.136–7.

Born of the body of Daphne, and with Apollo coursing through its veins, the laurel tree's silence is associated with a transformation that serves to evade unwanted passions, which, at a metaphorical level, translate once more into the very human emotions that contemporary poetic trends seek to escape. This reading is reinforced by Apollo's association with both poetry and reason (as opposed to Dionysian chaos), implying that the transformation is brought about by a poetic imperative which prioritizes reason over emotion.⁶⁵ As the site of both Daphne and Apollo, the laurel tree embodies the rejection of the lyrical mode, of emotional outpouring, in favor of a more constrained, impersonal aesthetic. Yet the voice in the poem has still to expunge itself of what we might call sincere emotion, where sincerity implies "total surrender to the lyrical impulse, to the need, the desire, to speak earnestly of oneself, to speak genuinely and directly of one's unique, personal experience."⁶⁶ This is evident in the poem's exclamatory tones and in the poet's own recognition of the futility of his lament ("O master of rhythm! Perhaps you think on / the futility of the poet's sad lament"). By contrast, as D. Gareth Walters has suggested, the laurel tree's association with silence is described in fecund terms ("Tree that produces fruits of silence").⁶⁷ Because of the limitations it marks for itself, the poem epitomizes the inconsistencies in *Book of Poems* which, often regarded as a work of apprenticeship, signals a move towards more impersonal modes of expression, but without ever quite reaching its goal. Walters suggests that "Invocation to the Laurel" "emerges like a protest at the facile fluency of [Lorca's] juvenilia and sets a higher, more demanding, goal."⁶⁸ Yet the poem, as is the case with many others in *Book of Poems*, is still "couched in the vocal lyricism of sincere emotion as opposed to the minimalism that the laurel's silence represents."⁶⁹

The poet's struggle to curtail emotion may have had something to do with the difficulties Lorca may have experienced as a young man coming to terms with the limitations society set on the expression of homosexual desire.⁷⁰ If so, the fact that impersonality should be the dominant aesthetic in art at that time might merely have been a coincidence that added to the poet's frustration. In such a reading, the poet of *Book of Poems* becomes a frustrated Orphic figure. For in a collection where his addressees are often trees (thus reminding

65 On Apollo, see Chevalier and Gheerbrant (1996), 34–5. See also Jobes (1961), l.110–11 (Apollo) and 414 (Daphne).

66 Bonaddio (2010), 17.

67 See Walters (2002), 80.

68 Walters (2002), 81.

69 Bonaddio (2010), 25.

70 See Sahuquillo (2007), 21–6, on Lorca's life and letters, silences and secrets.

us of the Ovidian version of the myth of Orpheus who also had trees for an audience), the poet, although he might sing melodies as forlorn as those of Orpheus, is unable to preach homosexuality as Ovid's archetypal poet did. Xon de Ros, who summarizes Ovid's version of Orpheus in her treatment of Lorca's *Lament for Ignacio Sánchez Mejías*, explains how Lorca's 1935 elegy to the bull-fighter comprises elements of both the Dionysian and Apollonian Orpheus.⁷¹ There is a compromise that takes place between, on the one hand, the poem's musical language and the emotional life it conveys, and, on the other, the conventions of the elegiac form and the necessary mastery of emotion that it implies. After all, as De Ros reminds us, "the consolation traditionally provided by the elegy represented a suppression or internalization of grief."⁷² If, however, in this later work, deeply evocative of Andalusia's classical heritage, we can see the full amalgamation of Dionysian and Apollonian principles, in *Book of Poems* the two are still very much at odds.

The tension between the personal and the impersonal is also apparent in the poem "Spring" [Manantial], subtitled "fragmento," and dated 1919. Responding to a mysterious call – "Become a tree! / (Said a voice in the distance)" [¡Sé árbol! / (Dijo una voz en la distancia)]⁷³ – this time it is the poet himself who undergoes the familiar tree-metamorphosis:

[...]

Yo me incrusté en el chopo centenario
con tristeza y con ansia.

Cual Dafne varonil que huye miedosa
de un Apolo de sombra y de nostalgia.

Mi espíritu fundióse con las hojas
y fue mi sangre savia.

En untosa resina convirtióse
la fuente de mis lágrimas.

El corazón se fue con las raíces,
y mi pasión humana,
haciendo heridas en la ruda carne,
fugaz me abandonaba.

[...] ⁷⁴

⁷¹ On the myth of Orpheus and its resonances in the poem, see De Ros (2000), 123–6; on the Dionysian and Apollonian Orpheus, see De Ros (2003), 86.

⁷² De Ros (2003), 83.

⁷³ OC i.125.

⁷⁴ OC i.126.

[I set myself in the centenary elm
 with sadness and longing.
 Like a masculine Daphne fleeing frightened
 from an Apollo of shadow and nostalgia.
 My spirit fused with the leaves
 and my blood, with the sap.
 Into an unctuous resin did transform
 the fountain of my tears.
 My heart lost itself in the roots,
 and my human passion,
 making wounds
 in the rude flesh,
 fleeting, abandoned me.]

As in “Invocation to the Laurel,” the transformation alluded to by means of the myth of Daphne and Apollo can be understood as a metaphor for creative transformation rooted in the principles of impersonal art. The poet, in effect, undergoes a process of dehumanization: “blood becomes sap, tears become resin, the heart disappears into roots, and human passion takes flight.”⁷⁵ But there are reasons why, despite the poet’s assertions, the poem’s impersonal credentials remain unconvincing, most obviously because by actually recounting his transformation and, for that matter, doing so in quite lyrical terms, the poet can at best only allude to a work in progress rather than offer an end-product born of an approach that is properly and thoroughly impersonal.

By contrast, the poems collected in Lorca’s 1927 publication *Songs* [Canciones], moved much closer towards the goals of impersonal art, “towards an aesthetic,” as Walters puts it, “that implied economy, understatement, detachment.”⁷⁶ Thus in a poem like “Sonnet” [Soneto], where there is, as Walters has noted, a sense of poetry “transcending emotion,”⁷⁷ the mythical figure of Philomela makes an apt appearance:

Largo espectro de plata conmovida,
 el viento de la noche suspirando
 abrió con mano gris mi vieja herida
 y se alejó; yo estaba deseando.

⁷⁵ Bonaddio (2010), 31.

⁷⁶ Walters (2002), 137.

⁷⁷ Walters (2002), 240.

Llaga de amor que me dará la vida
perpetua sangre y pura luz brotando.
Grieta en que Filomela enmudecida
tendrá bosque, dolor y nido blando.

¡Ay qué dulce rumor en mi cabeza!
Me tenderé junto a la flor sencilla
donde flota sin alma tu belleza.

Y el agua errante se pondrá amarilla,
mientras corre mi sangre en la maleza
olorosa y mojada de la orilla.⁷⁸

[Long specter of shaken silver,
the night's wind amid sighs
opened with its grey hand my old wound
and left; I was desirous.

Love's wound that will give me life
spilling forth perpetual blood and pure light.
Fissure in which a muted Philomela
will have her wood, her pain and gentle nest.

Oh what sweet murmuring in my head!
I will lie beside the simple flower
where your beauty floats soulless.

And the drifting water will turn yellow,
while my blood spills into fragrant and damp
undergrowth of the riverbank.]

Here it is the memory of love that provides the spur of the poem: memory conveyed as the reopening of an old wound. Yet despite the lyrical potential of the subject and the single exclamation which appears in the third stanza ("Oh what sweet murmuring in my head!" [¡Ay qué dulce rumor en mi cabeza!]), emotion in the poem is relatively contained. This is due, in part, to the way in which agency has been transferred in the poem from the first-person voice to non-human elements (wind, wound, water, blood); and, in part, to the

⁷⁸ OC i.378.

metaphorical construction at its heart, centering on the myth of Philomela. As the myth goes, Philomela was transformed into a nightingale so that she might escape the murderous clutches of Tereus, her brother-in-law, who had already raped her and then cut out her tongue to prevent her from denouncing him.⁷⁹ This metamorphosis connects the sonnet with poems we have looked at so far, but here the implications of the transformation are more far-reaching. The analogy between the heart's wound and the fissure which serves as the nestling place for a voiceless Philomela encapsulates the way in which emotion in the poem has given way to restraint. The sonnet, of course, reminds us of T. S. Eliot's own reference to Philomela in *The Waste Land* (1922): "The change of Philomel, by the barbarous king / So rudely forced; yet there the nightingale / Filled all the desert with inviolable voice."⁸⁰ But whereas in Eliot the nightingale's song may be understood as "a redeeming, spiritual response to suffering caused by a violent, physical act,"⁸¹ in Lorca the insistence on Philomela's inability to speak underscores his acquiescence to what Eliot, in "Tradition and the Individual Talent," called "an escape from personality."⁸² Eliot's idea of the self-sacrificing artist, where what is sacrificed is precisely the artist's personality, is played out in the final two stanzas of the sonnet, where the poet says he will prostrate himself and allow the blood escaping from his wound to spill into the river.

5 *Gypsy Ballads, the Bible, and Classical Mythology*

Lorca's subsequent collection, *Gypsy Ballads*, draws once more on Andalusia's hybrid culture, with allusions to the region's Roman, Moorish, and Judaic past and by having gypsies bring this heritage to life. In this respect, the collection is another example, on the one hand, of the mythic universality in Lorca's work, and, on the other, of his preoccupation with impersonal art through the poet's deferral of agency to the gypsy protagonists of the ballads. In at least two of them, "Tamar and Amnon" [Thamar y Amnón] and "Preciosa and the Wind" [Preciosa y el aire], classical mythology is once again a significant source.

"Tamar and Amnon" is, at one level, a reconstruction of the Biblical account of the rape of David's daughter by his son (and Tamar's half-brother). In David Loughran's compelling reading of the ballad, Lorca uses the Biblical tale "as a

79 Jobes (1961), ii.1263.

80 Eliot (1985), 30.

81 Bonaddio (2010), 89.

82 Eliot (1986), 58.

springboard for the construction of a mythical allegory of dawn.”⁸³ Essential to this reading is the parallel relationship between Tamar and Amnon and the classical siblings Diana and Apollo who “in their mythic roles as moon and sun [...] figuratively vie for the possession of the sky at dawn and dusk.”⁸⁴ This provides “the essential link between the parallel development of two seemingly dissimilar events and constitutes the key to Lorca’s allegorical treatment of the violent coming of dawn, the struggle between moon and sun, and the flight of Apollo through the daytime sky.”⁸⁵

The ballad’s opening sets the scene for this crepuscular struggle, the moon’s primacy threatened by the emerging summer heat:

La luna gira en el cielo
sobre las tierras sin agua
mientras el verano siembra
rumores de tigre y llama.⁸⁶

[The moon turns in the sky
over waterless lands
as summer sows
its sounds of tiger and flame.]

In the course of the poem, the siblings’ respective credentials as heavenly bodies are established. Tamar is connected to the cold and, by association, the moon:

Thamar estaba soñando
pájaros en su garganta,
al son de panderos fríos
y cítaras enlunadas.
Su desnudo en el alero,
agudo norte de palma,
pide copos a su vientre
y granizo a sus espaldas.
Thamar estaba cantando
desnuda por la terraza.

83 Loughran (1972), 260.

84 Loughran (1972), 261.

85 Loughran (1972), 261.

86 *OC* i.439.

Alrededor de sus pies,
cinco palomas heladas.⁸⁷

[Tamar was dreaming of
birds in her throat,
to the sound of cold tambourines
and moon-shaped zithers.
Her nakedness beside the eaves,
a palm tree's sharp north,
asks snowflakes for her belly
and hailstones for her back.
Tamar was singing
naked on the terrace.

Around her feet,
five frozen doves.]

Amnon, on the other hand, is cast as sexually alert and desirous. His activity heralds the new day. In contrast to Tamar's coldness, to her frigidity ("cold tambourines," "moon-shaped zithers," "snowflakes," "hailstones," "frozen doves"), Amnon is grounded in the material processes of carnal desire:

Amnón, delgado y concreto,
en la torre la miraba,
llenas las ingles de espuma
y oscilaciones la barba.
Su desnudo iluminado
se tendía en la terraza,
con un rumor entre dientes
de flecha recién clavada.⁸⁸

[Amnon, slim and solid,
from the tower watched her,
his loins full of foam
and his beard, of oscillations.
His illuminated nakedness
stretched across the terrace,

87 OC i.439–40.

88 OC i.440.

with the sound, kept under the breath,
of an arrow which has just struck.]

Yet if, in erotic terms, Amnon's desire might seem to offer a Dionysian aspect, the Apollonian stands its ground by virtue of the predominance in the ballad of controlled and controlling metaphors. Passions are, in a formal sense, "kept under the breath" rather than let loose via exclamation. The gaze of the young man, allied to this controlling principle, is put at the service of figuration, by which Tamar's breasts appear to Amnon in the very shape of the moon:

Amnón estaba mirando
la luna redonda y baja,
y vio en la luna los pechos
durísimos de su hermana.⁸⁹

[Amnon was looking at the
the round, low moon,
and saw in the moon
the hard breasts of his sister.]

Tamar is eventually drawn into a dialogue with Amnon in which decorous metaphor dominates, notwithstanding the deeply sexual implications of what is said:

Thamar, bórrame los ojos
con tu fija madrugada.
Mis hilos de sangre tejen
volantes sobre tu falda.
Déjame tranquila, hermano.
Son tus besos en mi espalda
avispa y viente-cillos
en doble enjambre de flautas.
Thamar, en tus pechos altos
hay dos peces que me llaman,
y en las yemas de tus dedos
rumor de rosa encerrada.⁹⁰

89 OC i.440.

90 OC i.441.

[Tamar, erase my eyes
 with your fixed dawn.
 The threads of my blood weave
 frills upon your skirt.
 Leave me alone, my brother.
 Your kisses on my back are
 wasps and bursts of wind
 in double swarms of flutes.
 Tamar, from your lofty breasts
 there are two fishes calling me,
 and on your fingertips
 the murmur of a cloistered rose.]

Tamar's and Amnon's ballad is thus an elaborate conceit in which the horror of violation gives way to the edifying constructions of poetry – the Apollonian winning out over the Dionysian overall. The following verses describe the rape itself:

Ya la coge del cabello,
 ya la camisa le rasga.
 Corales tibios dibujan
 arroyos en rubio mapa.⁹¹

[Now he grabs her by the hair,
 now he tears her nightdress.
 Warm corals draw
 streams on a map of blonde.]

While the first two lines, as Derek Harris suggests, arguably “indicate the violence of the rape with a directness free of metaphor,” the next two lines “enclose Tamar’s blood in a complex conceit, as if its presence could only be tolerated in an oblique expression.”⁹² Indeed, there is no direct reference to “the blood of Tamar’s ruptured hymen” (but instead, to “warm corals”) or to its “trickling over her white skin” (but rather to “streams on her map of blonde”).⁹³ Metaphor, in effect, displaces “the crudely prosaic onto the circumlocutory decency of poetic conceit.”⁹⁴

91 *OC* i.441.

92 Harris (1991), 80.

93 See Harris (1991), 80.

94 Bonaddio (2010), 125.

Significantly, in the final stanza of "Tamar and Amnon," David brings the ballad to an end by cutting the strings of his harp:

Violador enfurecido,
 Amnón huye con su jaca.
 Negros le dirigen flechas
 en los muros y atalayas.
 Y cuando los cuatro cascós
 eran cuatro resonancias,
 David con unas tijeras
 cortó las cuerdas del arpa.⁹⁵

[A rapist enraged,
 Amnon flees on horseback.
 Negroes fire arrows at him
 from their parapets and watchtowers.
 And when the four hooves
 were no more than four distant sounds,
 David with a pair of scissors
 cut the strings of his harp.]

At one level, David's act of cutting his harp's strings shows his anger and dismay. On another, it constitutes a highly self-conscious device by which to bring the music of the poem to its conclusion and, most significantly, to allude to the poem's reigning (silencing) principle: namely, that of keeping (human) emotion at bay in the quest for singularly poetic expression. "The emotion of art," Eliot argued, "is impersonal."⁹⁶

While classical mythology is not cited explicitly in "Tamar and Amnon," it is a significant point of reference in the ballad's recreation of the dawn and its exploration of the tension between passion and restraint, between lyricism and impersonality, between Dionysian and Apollonian aspects. That the references are not explicit testifies, no doubt, to the extent to which the classical is deeply embedded in Lorca's sense of hybrid Andalusian culture. It also marks the extent of his development as a poet since *Book of Poems* and the ability he had acquired along the way to integrate his sources more completely into his work. This same ability is evident in "Preciosa and the Wind," where there is a similar threat of violation, although on this occasion it is averted. Critics have pointed to various sources for the ballad, although Loughran once again

95 OC i.442. For uses of the word "Negro" in the 1920s, see Rankine, this volume.

96 Eliot (1986), 59.

focuses on the classical connection, noting that the poet Guillén attributed the poem's principal source to Ovid's account of the rape of Orithyia by Boreas.⁹⁷ The ballad presents us with the story of the pursuit by the wind of a gypsy girl named Preciosa. Beneath its elaborate conceit there is possibly a psychological (psychosexual) explanation for the young girl's fear of the wind. But the poem, as I have suggested elsewhere, may also be read as a self-conscious treatment of the principle of impersonality in art.⁹⁸ Irrespective of the interpretation, what is evident is that Lorca has succeeded in fashioning an original myth of his own; one that borrows from classical culture mechanisms such as the anthropomorphism of natural deities as well as the central motifs of pursuit, violation, and flight. The moon is in play once more, this time in the form of the tambourine which the gypsy girl Preciosa plays as she walks, reminiscent of the cold tambourine and moon-shaped zithers that are associated with Tamar. In contrast to Preciosa's music, the sound of the lascivious wind is characterized by the flute, confirming this entity's satyric associations:

Su luna de pergamino
Preciosa tocando viene.
Al verla se ha levantado
el viento, que nunca duerme.
San Cristobalón desnudo,
lleno de lenguas celestes,
mira a la niña tocando
una dulce gaita ausente.⁹⁹

[Her parchment moon
Preciosa comes playing.
On seeing her, the wind,
which never sleeps, has risen up.
A naked giant Saint Christopher
full of heavenly tongues,
watches the young girl as he plays
his sweet absent flute.]

97 Loughran (1972), 257. On the various sources of the ballad, see Harris (1991), 20 and Ramsden (1988), 8–9.

98 See Bonaddio (2010), 105–11.

99 *OC* i.395–6.

As in "Tamar and Amnon," even the wind's most menacing and intrusive words are transmuted by the aesthetic priorities of the ballad's conceits:

Niña, deja que levante
tu vestido para verte.
Abre en mis dedos antiguos
la rosa azul de tu vientre.¹⁰⁰

[Girl, let me lift
your dress to see you.
Open in my ancient fingers
the blue rose of your belly.]

The wind's exhortations frighten Preciosa and instigate her flight against the backdrop of an animated landscape:

Preciosa tira el pandero
y corre sin detenerse.
El viento-hombrón la persigue
con una espada caliente.

Frunce su rumor el mar.
Los olivos palidecen.
Cantan las flautas de umbría
y el liso gong de la nieve.

¡Preciosa, corre, Preciosa,
que te coge el viento verde!
¡Preciosa, corre, Preciosa!
¡Míralo por dónde viene!
Sátiro de estrellas bajas
con sus lenguas relucientes.¹⁰¹

[Preciosa throws down her tambourine
and runs away.]

100 OC i.396.

101 OC i.396.

The wind-giant pursues her
with a hot sword.

The sea frowns its murmurs.
Olive trees turn pale.
The flutes of shadow and
the snow's smooth gong sing.

Preciosa, run, Preciosa,
or the bawdy wind will get you!
Preciosa, run, Preciosa!
See how close he is!
Satyr of low stars
with his shining tongues.]

Unlike other myths, it is not a metamorphosis that comes to the rescue here, although the refuge Preciosa does find has similar implications in the context of Lorca's poetics:

Preciosa, llena de miedo,
entra en la casa que tiene,
más arriba de los pinos,
el cónsul de los ingleses.

Asustados por los gritos
tres carabineros vienen,
sus negras capas ceñidas
y los gorros en las sienes.

El inglés da a la gitana
un vaso de tibia leche,
y una copa de ginebra
que Preciosa no se bebe.

Y mientras cuenta, llorando,
su aventura a aquella gente,
en las tejas de pizarra
el viento, furioso, muerde.¹⁰²

102 OC i.396–7.

[Preciosa, fearful,
enters the house
beyond the pines
owned by the English consul.

Frightened by the shouting
come three carabineers,
their black capes wrapped around them,
their caps pulled over their temples.

The Englishman gives the gypsy girl
a glass of warm milk,
and another of gin
which Preciosa does not drink.

And while, in tears, she tells
these people her adventure,
on the tiles of the slate roof
the wind, furious, keeps biting.]

In Lorca's modern myth, the emotions associated with Preciosa's fear and her flight are contained, not via some transformation but within the walls of the house, where, out of earshot, the young girl, crying, recounts her story. The phlegmatic, albeit clichéd, connotations of Englishness ensure that the place she has found evokes calm rather than emotion and, with it, apposite reserve and discretion. Beyond matters relating to her state of mind, Preciosa's final location alludes to, and confirms, the ballad's accommodation to the principles of a restrained, impersonal aesthetic.

Impersonality dominates at the end of "Preciosa and the Wind" and has, to a great extent, been guaranteed throughout the poem because of the third-person narrative employed. Impersonality is also a consequence of the way in which the poem brings its metaphorical constructions to the fore, rendering the human emotion at the heart of the story merely the basis for its conceits. "Preciosa and the Wind" is deeply indebted to Góngora, as are the ballads overall, couching everyday scenes – a windy day, the sunrise – in a metaphorical language that, while retaining an attachment to its common, often rural referents, is highly inventive, at times quite complex, and privileges the imagination over direct experience of the world. The combination of figures derived from Andalusian folklore, the Bible and classical culture is integral to the creation of this thoroughly poetic world, at the same time recognizing the hybrid character of Andalusia's cultural heritage and identity.

6 Conclusions

Leaving aside the more facile references of his early work, Lorca's engagement with classical culture may be understood in the context of his attachment to Andalusia's hybrid heritage and his strategy of drawing on classical mythology (en route to creating his own myths) in a quest to create independent, impersonal art in accordance with the dominant aesthetic of the day. Classical referents – specifically those related to myths of metamorphosis – served Lorca in the task of ridding poetry of an excessively lyrical voice in favor of a more controlled, reticent expression. This begins to be the case, for example, in the self-conscious reflections of “Invocation to the Laurel” and “Spring.” With time, classical references become more fully embedded in the metaphorical logic of his poetry, culminating in the elaborate Gongorine conceits of the ballads. Throughout, Lorca's engagement with classical culture is allied to his understanding of the character of Andalusia's cultural heritage. In Andalusia's ties with, amongst others, classical culture, Lorca saw a mythic universality that constituted a bridge between the region, and, by extension, Spain, and the rest of Europe. To recognize this is to contest, as Lorca himself did, the very binary oppositions that shaped the reception of his work. Via this mythic universality, the poet confounded simplistic divisions between center and periphery, as well as definitions of what was and was not modern, and distinctions between high- and lowbrow culture. Lorca's work was synthetic and as such, despite narrow definitions imposed on his locality and his localness, it bore the credentials of thoroughly modern and Modernist art. If classical culture had its place in this synthesis, it was not only because it was a staple reference for Modernism more generally, but because it was an integral part of Andalusia's eternal tradition. The presence of classical culture in poems that figure *cante jondo* or gypsies should be considered no more unusual, no more out of place, than (as Lorca himself knew) a fragment of mosaic emerging from Andalusia's furrowed land.

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Afterword

A. E. Stallings

Reading these wide-ranging and disparate essays on classical reception and poetry across the globe, over time and space, has made me think more deeply about the importance of classical reception and translation to my own poetry, how deeply entwined they are, from childhood. My memories of first encounters with Greek mythology, with Latin, and with the Greek alphabet, center on the home of my maternal grandfather, an Episcopal priest in Louisville, Kentucky. I recall the longueurs of childhood, motes of dust in sunbeams, enforced periods of quiet (when my grandfather was not to be disturbed), bookshelves, and his mysterious office. (His office was a bright sunroom – the brightest room in the house – and the only untidy one – crammed with a forest of teetering stacks of paper, a typewriter, a jumble of reference books and dictionaries.) The office was mysterious because it was a room we were seldom allowed in – no one was – and that my grandmother was always looking for a surreptitious opportunity to enter and put in some order. In it somewhere, among the papers, was his own translation of books of the New Testament from the Greek, which he had done in seminary, and of which he was proud. The bookshelves in the children's nursery were filled with picture books from the '40s, complete fairy tales of the Brothers Grimm and Hans Christian Andersen, some old children's classics, like *Bambi* and *Pinocchio* (not the Disney versions – darker, stranger), or *Alice in Wonderland*; Bible stories for children, and books of Greek and Norse mythology for children. My sister and I read and reread through this library, year after year, limited in scope, but fertile for the imagination – to our minds, there was no material difference among stories like “The Girl Who Trod on a Loaf,” where a proud girl is pulled down to a dismal underworld ruled by the Marsh Witch, and the abduction of Persephone to Hades, or Alice disappearing down the rabbit hole to a land of upside-down logic. When we felt we had exhausted these books, we would tentatively explore the tall bookshelves of the grown-ups, filled with heavy dry tomes, theological or historical in nature, and beyond our interest and our ken. (They lacked, as Alice would have said, pictures and conversations.) But our grandfather also had a selection of poetry books, heavy in T. S. Eliot, and these, while also hard to understand, were more inviting, with their white spaces and fewer words on the page. (One book was even about cats.) There was a playfulness of sounds, pleasurable as nonsense, even if we didn't understand all the words. And among these poems were snatches of Latin, a quotation from Greek, a code within a code, obscurely

connected, somehow, with the typing and paper mountains and thick dictionaries of the forbidden room next door, which themselves had some connection to pithy, learned homilies, hymns with their archaic but delicious syntax, and sitting in hard pews that smelled of beeswax.

Myth, poetry, language imperfectly but pleasurably understood or misunderstood, all seem, somehow then, to be connected with a point in childhood where we were trying to glimpse into the sanctum of the adult world, just beyond our view, but also, for me now, connect back to childhood afternoons that seemed to stand outside of time, in the amber of mote-capturing sunbeams, consciousness on the verge of discoveries. Classics, and more specifically classical reception, remains this portal for me, this time machine to timelessness, that connects me not only to earlier cultures, but to childhood itself, with its melancholy loneliness and unmitigated wonder, part and parcel of the poetic impulse.

I am reminded of this by these essays partly because so many of them center on poets of various cultures and languages returning to classical authors (particularly Homer) as a way to connect or reconnect to some sort of freshness and newness, to pull up cold, fresh inspiration from an artesian source, ancient and early. And I am also reminded of these experiences because these essays also show how even misunderstanding of classics – for instance, the Imagists' fashioning of their free verse based on a systemic failure to grasp choral meters in Greek – can be as or more generative than scholarly rigor. (Ezra Pound's make-it-new project presides over the volume.) Reception can be as much about defining a literature or language against the foil of Greek or Latin as it can be about exploiting or adopting lessons taken from these languages. It is no surprise, perhaps, that chapters on Chinese or Japanese classical reception – languages and lands that seem perhaps furthest afield from Greece and Rome – focus on individual scholar/poets and their efforts to wrestle with translation and classical themes. Or that in languages at once very different to Greek and Latin, but located in lands that arguably constitute part of the larger classical world (Arabic and Hebrew, for instance), classical reception in poetry comes late, and is bound up intimately in issues of modernity and the relationship with Europe and the West – that is, with European classical reception itself. For African American poets, reception is often tied up and with images of the Middle Passage, Aegean turned lethal Atlantic, with a focus on the Odyssean Nekyia and conversations with the dead. Italy stands in a special position, with Italian being the epigon of Latin, and standing on the ruins of Rome, as the vernacular sometimes struggles for autonomy, and sometimes gathers strength and reinforcement from its glorious ancestor; a tension fraught with political import, as Fascism (from the Latin, "fasces," the rods

of imperial power) stakes its claim in the classical past. Greek, on the other hand, is seen here by her poets (or at least by the Nobel Laureate and diplomat George Seferis) not as a descendant from ancient Greek, but as a continuum, and so the project of reception is one of reclamation by echolocation, of poets speaking directly to Homer over millennia, and listening for Homer whispering back, in a recognizable if archaic form of the spoken tongue. Reception involves across these pages not just imitation, allusion and dialogue, meter and genre, but translation as its own art form, and ekphrasis of ancient art works, whether Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn," or Nishiwaki's "Platter," a description of the Dionysus Kylix (and perhaps the first Japanese ekphrasis poem); Rilke's "Archaic Torso of Apollo" or Tchernichovsky's "Before the Statue of Apollo."

Seminal translations in various languages of the *Aeneid* (itself a reception of Homer) and the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* become literary touchstones in their own right. As Tambakaki reminds us in her introduction, the figure we encounter most frequently in these essays and articles is Odysseus (or Ulysses), who, appropriately, has travelled the world seeing many cities and learning the minds (and perhaps the languages) of men. The journey of the *Odyssey* travels across borders and seas, and finds itself as at home washed up on Derek Walcott's Saint Lucia as Giovanna Bemporad's Italy or Tchernichovsky's British Mandate Palestine.

The figure of Odysseus, not only traveler over borders but across time, embodies something essential about classical reception. Odysseus is always having to define himself to others and in so doing often reinvents himself. To move forward, he must return to the place of his starting out. He prepares a future by walking over his ancestral lands and revisiting those who knew him as a child, who recognize him by his old wounds, those who knew him as a young man and share with him a knowledge of secret roots. He renews by looking back.

This is how it works for me also – classical reception is a sort of door through time where I can glimpse back into the freshness of a dawn world, a child adrift in the hush of an adult's library, while standing in adulthood, with all its complexities and hard-won knowledge and doubts; Homer speaks to me across millennia, but also by way of modern Greek, a language I am now surrounded by, and through a line from a sonnet of du Bellay, or through "Yannis" Keats's encounter with a rousing Elizabethan translation. Perhaps that is another way of thinking about T. S. Eliot's "historical sense."

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